FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
priest
STARS of CHAOS
SHA PO LANG
1

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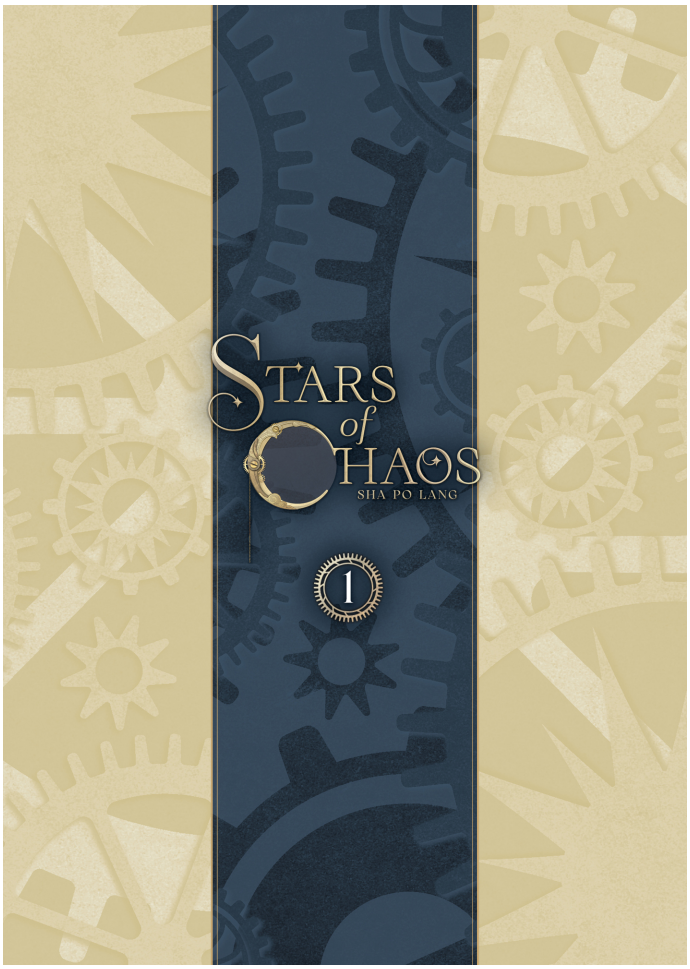
STARS
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# Stars of Chaos

SHA PO LANG

1

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Seven Seas

*Seven Seas Entertainment*

STARS OF CHAOS:
SHA PO LANG VOL. 1

Published originally under the title of《杀破狼》(Sha Po Lang)
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Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

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ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-931-0
Printed in Canada
First Printing: July 2023
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

晋江文学城
WWW.JJWXC.NET

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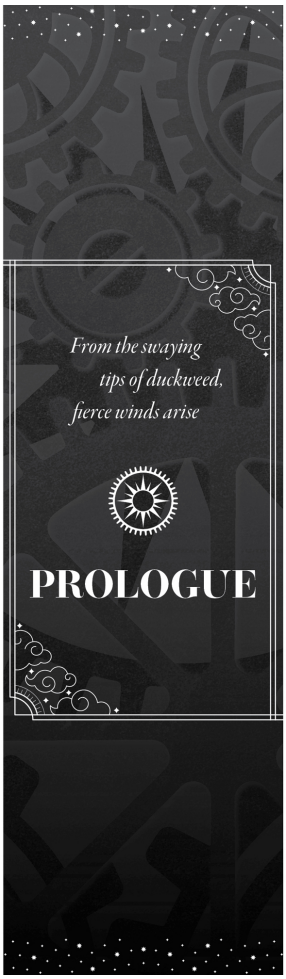

From the swaying
tips of duckweed,
fierce winds arise
PROLOGUE

# Chapter 1:
# Borderlands

IN THE SMALL BORDER TOWN of Yanhui, there was a hill known as General's Slope. Despite its majestic name, it was, in reality, nothing more than a small mound of earth. Those with long necks could easily see over its crest.

General's Slope hadn't always existed. Fourteen years ago, the Black Iron Battalion, the number one armored cavalry of Great Liang, had embarked on the Northern Expedition and laid waste to the Eighteen Barbarian Tribes. It was said that as they passed through Yanhui Town on their march back to the capital, the victorious troops cast aside their battered armor and created this mound. After many years of being swept by sand and dust and battered by wind and rain, General's Slope took form.

General's Slope was barren. No matter what seeds one sowed here, nothing would grow. Even weeds refused to thrive, and consequently, there wasn't even any brush behind which those who wished to carry on clandestine love affairs might hide. Such a bald patch of dirt was completely useless. The old folks of the town all agreed the place was cursed—the murderous crimes committed by the Black Iron Battalion were so severe that malevolent energy had accumulated and overwhelmed this bit of earth. In time, some idle troublemakers cooked up a whole series of chilling ghost stories about the borderlands based on their words. Thus, by and by, people stopped going there.

The sky was already darkening, yet two ten-year-old kids had run out to the base of General's Slope.

One was tall and thin, while the other was short and round. Paired together, the two of them looked like a bowl and chopsticks hurtling along.

The tall, thin one was dressed like a girl, and only upon closer inspection did it become clear that he was, in fact, a boy. He was called Cao Niangzi. When he was very young, a fortune-teller declared that he had been destined to be born a girl. Since he had been reincarnated into the wrong body, there was a chance the heavens might recall his soul and recast

him in a form that matched his destiny. Fearing he would die young, his family named him “Lady” and raised him as a girl.

The short, round one was the youngest son of Butcher Ge. He was called Ge Pangxiao and, living up to his name of “Little Porker,” his skin was coated in a faint but rich sheen of oil.

The two of them craned their necks and peered over at General’s Slope. Recalling those hair-raising tales, neither of them dared draw any closer.

Ge Pangxiao held a copper-plated field scope up to his eye. Straining his neck, he looked intently at General’s Slope. “The sun’s already set, but he still hasn’t come down from the hill. My dage[1] is really…what’s the word—slamming the books hard!”

“It’s ‘hitting the books hard’—but enough nonsense,” Cao Niangzi said. “Hurry up and hand over that scope.”

This sham of a girl played his role almost too well. It was just a pity that the way he played it left something to be desired. He was nothing like a well-bred young lady; rather, he resembled nothing so much as a coarse shrew with a distinct fondness for pinching people with those chicken claws of his. Every time he extended his crooked fingers, Ge Pangxiao’s flabby flesh would begin aching dully in anticipation of an attack. He hurried to obediently offer the field scope to the other boy. “Be careful with that,” he warned. “My dad’ll beat me into mincemeat if we break it.”

The so-called “field scope” was a small hollow cylinder made of copper. It was engraved with an image of five bats[2] and fitted with a crystal-clear disc of glass on the inside. Looking through this scope, one could determine the sex of a rabbit from over ten kilometers away. Ge Pangxiao’s field scope was of unusually fine make, having been left to him by his grandfather, a former military scout.

Cao Niangzi held it reverently in his hands for a long while before lifting it skyward to look up at the stars. “It’s so clear.”

Ge Pangxiao looked up as well and pointed. “I know that one. That’s the evening star. It’s also called ‘Changgeng,’—the same as my dage. Shen-xiansheng[3] taught it to us before.”

“Who are you calling your dage?” Cao Niangzi’s lip curled. “As if he pays you any mind. You’re always following him around, sucking up to him and insisting he’s your dage. Honestly, it’s embarrassing… Hey, wait. Isn’t that him over there?”

Following Cao Niangzi’s pointing finger, Ge Pangxiao saw the person he’d been waiting for.

A youth with a sword in his hand and his head bowed was slowly making his way down General’s Slope. Suddenly it was as though Ge Pangxiao no longer feared the ghosts. He burst forth like a ball of lightning, hollering, “Dage! Dage!”

In his haste, he tripped at the bottom of General’s Slope and somersaulted into a heap, coming to a stop at the youth’s feet. Ge Pangxiao lifted his grimy face, not even bothering to push himself up as he revealed a silly, flattering smile. The smile became a grimace as he said, “Hee hee, Dage, I’ve been waiting for you all day.”

The youth named Chang Geng silently withdrew his foot from where he had nearly trodden on Ge Pangxiao.

Whenever Chang Geng saw Ge Pangxiao, he felt a little amazed. Butcher Ge, who had slaughtered so many thousands of pigs, must have been born with a pair of eagle eyes. How else to explain how the man had managed to avoid butchering his own son for so many years? But Chang Geng had a steady nature and was unfailingly courteous. He kept his thoughts to himself; he would never say something so unkind out loud.

In a manner quite becoming of an older brother, Chang Geng helped Ge Pangxiao to his feet. “Why are you running?” he asked, dusting the younger boy off. “Be careful you don’t fall and hurt yourself. Were you looking for me?”

“Chang Geng-dage, your dad’s coming back with the others tomorrow. We don’t have class either, so why don’t we go goose-feed snatching together? We could beat the snot out of that little monkey Li and the rest of his gang!”

Chang Geng’s father was Company Commander Xu, but the two shared no blood relation.

At the age of two or three, Chang Geng had followed his widowed mother Xiu-niang[4] to the border to seek refuge with relatives, only for the pair to find themselves stranded—said relatives had moved away long ago. It just so happened that Company Commander Xu, the commanding officer of the troops stationed in Yanhui Town, was a widower whose wife had died young and left him no children. He took a fancy to Xiu-niang, and soon took her as his second wife.

Company Commander Xu was presently leading a contingent of soldiers beyond the border to collect the barbarians' annual tribute. Reckoning the days since he'd set out, he ought to be returning within a day or two.

Life on the border was simple and poor, and the children here rarely enjoyed luxuries like snacks. Whenever the soldiers marched out to collect tribute, they picked up some of the barbarians' dried meats and cheese along the way, which they would then toss into the crowds waiting by the roadside upon their return. This was the phenomenon known as "goose-feed snatching," wherein street urchins scrambled to fight each other for food like geese for scraps of bread. With all the kids grabbing for prizes at once, it was practically inevitable that the crowd would come to blows. As long as no one got seriously hurt, the adults turned a blind eye, allowing the children to band together and gang up on each other as they pleased.

All the kids in town knew this: when it came time for goose-feed snatching, whoever won Chang Geng's allegiance was guaranteed a certain victory.

Ever since he began learning martial arts as a child, Chang Geng had been meticulous in his practice. Countless military families lived along the border, so there were plenty of children who studied martial arts. But practicing martial arts was a grueling process, so most kids only ever casually dabbled, their sloppy efforts yielding unexceptional results. Chang Geng was the only one who had climbed General's Slope daily to train alone since the day he picked up the sword. His years of diligent practice were a testament to his extraordinary determination.

Chang Geng had yet to turn fourteen, yet he could already lift a sword weighing over thirty kilograms with one hand. He was well aware of

his capabilities and never took part in the other kids' scuffles. Nevertheless, the other children were all inexplicably a bit scared of him.

Chang Geng brushed aside Ge Pangxiao's proposal with a smile. "I'm way too old to be chasing after goose feed."

Ge Pangxiao refused to back down. "I already talked to Shen-xiansheng, and he agreed to give us the next few days off!"

Chang Geng walked slowly with his hands behind his back, the heavy sword bumping against his leg with every stride. Ge Pangxiao's words were childish, and he ignored them. It was his decision whether to study or train with his sword—it didn't matter whether their tutor gave them a day off or not.

"Besides," continued Ge Pangxiao, "Shen-xiansheng said he needs to change Uncle Shiliu's medications, and he might have to head out of town to purchase medicinal herbs, so he won't be home anyway. You won't have anywhere to go, so you might as well come with us. Don't you get bored training all day?"

These words finally caught Chang Geng's attention. He stopped walking and turned to Ge Pangxiao. "Didn't Shiliu just get back from Changyang Pass? How did he get sick again?"

"Uh…that's what I heard. But then again, he never really gets better, does he?"

"Well, in that case, I'm gonna go check on him." Chang Geng waved at his two little tag-alongs and said, "Hurry home; it's so late already. Your dad'll beat you if you hold up dinner."

"Ah, Dage. About the…"

Chang Geng had no interest in listening to him prattle on. The difference of a single year meant a lot to boys this age when it came to size and maturity. Chang Geng was already beginning to find it difficult to play with little kids like Ge Pangxiao. With his longer stride and taller stature, he left the two younger boys behind in the blink of an eye.

Ge Pangxiao's plan to win Chang Geng as an ally was a failure; the plump boy had wasted his time. He sighed in disappointment and turned back to glare at Cao Niangzi.

“Why didn’t you say anything?!”

Cao Niangzi’s cheeks were bright red, his gaze drifting. All his bossiness from a moment ago had completely evaporated. Clutching at his chest like a love-struck maiden, he said, “Even when he’s just walking, my Chang Geng-dage really does look more handsome than anyone else.”

Speechless, Ge Pangxiao decided at that moment that he would never go out with this embarrassing loser ever again.

The Shen-xiansheng and Uncle Shiliu of whom Ge Pangxiao spoke were a pair of brothers who shared a somewhat special relationship with Chang Geng.

Two years ago, when Chang Geng was not yet so grown up, he’d snuck out of the city gate by himself to play. In the wilderness outside town, he’d gotten lost, and was quickly surrounded by a pack of wolves that would have dragged him away had the Shen brothers not luckily passed close by. The pair saved his life, driving away the starving wolves using the medicinal powder they carried. To thank them for saving Chang Geng’s life, Company Commander Xu leased the brothers one of his empty courtyards free of charge, and the two settled down in Yanhui Town.

The elder of the two was called Shen Yi. He was a failed scholar who had flunked the imperial examination multiple times. Although still quite young, he had long given up his political aspirations and accepted his lot in life as a recluse in a backwater town. All the neighbors politely referred to him as “Shen-xiansheng.”

In addition to being a recluse, Shen-xiansheng also worked as a doctor, scribe of letters and poetry, teacher, artificer, and countless other occupations. A jack-of-all-trades, not only could he treat all sorts of sprains, fractures, and contusions, he could also deliver a foal from a pregnant mare. During the day, he managed his own private school, where he taught a gaggle of the town’s youngsters how to read and write. After dismissing his students in the evening, he would roll up his sleeves and repair steam engines, steel suits of armor, and all sorts of puppets to supplement the household’s living expenses. For a recluse, he was awfully busy.

On top of being both breadwinner and homemaker for his family of two, Shen-xiansheng was also an excellent cook. He was tremendously capable, and as a consequence, his brother had nothing left to apply himself

to except bringing the family's fortunes to ruin. Shen-xiansheng's brother was called Shen Shiliu. He had been sickly since birth, and fearing that he wouldn't live past childhood, his family never bothered to give him a proper name. Since he was born on the sixteenth day of the first month, they gave him the name "Shiliu": Sixteen.

Shiliu spent his days neither studying nor working. He didn't even stand oil bottles back up when they tipped over, and no one had ever witnessed him so much as lift a bucket of water. If he wasn't strolling carelessly about, then he was drinking wine. In short, he was deeply ignorant and totally incompetent, and there was almost nothing good about him—aside from being good-looking.

But he really was very good-looking. The town's most venerable elders had personally appraised him, agreeing that in all their nearly ninety years on this earth, they had never seen a man with such perfect features.

The pity was, no matter how good looking he might be, it was all a waste. Shen Shiliu had suffered a bout of grave illness as a child, and the fever left him permanently impaired. His weak eyes could only make out objects within half a meter with any clarity. At ten steps away, he wouldn't be able to tell if a person was a man or a woman. He was also hard of hearing. To speak with him, one couldn't avoid yelling, and every day when Chang Geng passed by the Shens' front door, he could hear the gentle and refined Shen-xiansheng barking at Shiliu like a mad dog.

Put bluntly, Shen Shiliu was a blind and deaf invalid.

Given his handsome face, he should have, by all rights, been a pretty boy favored by heaven itself. Unfortunately, in a border town, whether one was a demon or a god, everyone was one thing—poor. Even if an immortal heavenly beauty were to descend on Yanhui Town, no one here had the means to provide for them.

In these border towns, there was a local custom for occasions when great debts of gratitude could not be repaid. To show their heartfelt thanks, a recipient of a good deed would recognize their benefactor by calling them godparent. Those with children or grandchildren would declare their progeny the godchild of their benefactor; those without children would assume the responsibility of this filial duty themselves.

Studying all those books must have addled Shen-xiansheng's brain, for when it came time to accept repayment for rescuing a wayward child, he stubbornly insisted that such a relationship violated ceremonial rites and refused any such arrangement. Surprisingly, it was his brother Master Shiliu who joyfully accepted, immediately warming to his new role and calling Chang Geng "son."

So it was that the wastrel Shen Shiliu gained an enormously unfair advantage. Even in the event that this lazy invalid fell into wretched poverty, Chang Geng would be obligated to provide for his godparent's needs for the rest of his life and settle matters after his death.

Striding through the courtyards of his home with easy familiarity, Chang Geng took a turn just beyond the corner gate and promptly arrived at Shen-xiansheng's residence. The Shen family was made up of two bachelors—they didn't even keep a female hen—so there was no need for any particular propriety. Chang Geng came and went as he pleased without even bothering to knock.

Stepping across the threshold, he was at once assaulted by the strong scent of medicine coupled with the gossamer-thin sound of a round-bodied xun.[5]

Shen-xiansheng stood in the courtyard decocting medicinal herbs with a scowl on his face. A scholarly young man, he was dressed in a long robe faded and frayed with age. He wasn't old, but he had a perpetual frown and was enveloped by an air of impoverished mundanity.

As for the sound of the flute, it came from inside the house. A lamp cast the slender shadow of its player dimly upon the window's paper screen. The xun player's skill left much to be desired—Chang Geng couldn't even make out the tune, and every now and then, a handful of notes were unceremoniously dropped from existence. Though barely audible, the entire piece filled the small courtyard with a peculiar air of desolation and weariness.

It was a bit of a stretch to call this music. After listening a while, Chang Geng felt that if he were pressed to pay the player a compliment, he could only say that, for a performance of funeral wailing, it was remarkably restrained.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Shen Yi turned to smile at Chang Geng, then yelled into the house, “Hey Grandpa! Please have some mercy on the rest of us. Are you trying to make us pee our pants[6]? Chang Geng’s here!”

The xun player turned a deaf ear. Granted, with his auditory powers, it was possible he simply hadn’t heard.

After listening to him go on for some time, Chang Geng felt that the xun player was fairly energetic and didn’t seem to be sick. Relieved, he asked, “I heard from Ge Pangxiao that Xiansheng is changing Shiliu’s prescription. What’s wrong with him?”

Shen-xiansheng appraised the medicinal broth with a discerning eye and groused, “Nothing’s wrong with him. Change of season, that’s all. The four seasons each require a different prescription. This patient is very finicky and difficult to care for—oh right, it’s just as well that you’re here. I’m not sure where he managed to get it, but he was planning on delivering it to you first thing tomorrow morning. Go on in and take a look.”

# Chapter 2:
# Godfather

CHANG GENG picked up the medicine and stepped into his young godfather's room.

The only source of light in Shen Shiliu's room was a gloomy little oil lamp. It gave off a pea-sized halo of light, like a firefly's glow. The room's owner sat leaning against the window with his face submerged in shadow, the lamplight revealing only the faintest hint of his features. Because he was about to go to bed, Shen Shiliu hadn't bothered to tie up his hair, leaving his long locks unbound in a disheveled mess. Both the outer corner of his eye and his earlobe were marked with a tiny cinnabar mole, as if he had been pricked by a needle. All the meager light in the room seemed to converge on that delicate pair of beauty marks. They flared with such brightness they nearly burned the eyes.

In the lamplight, this man seemed even more alluring than usual.

It was only natural to love beauty. Even though Chang Geng was used to it by now, he still couldn't help but catch his breath. He blinked rapidly, trying to clear his vision of those glaringly bright beauty marks. Clearing his throat, he raised his voice and called, "Shiliu, it's time to take your medicine."

The youth was at a stage in his life where his voice was still deepening, so he often had to strain a little when speaking to this half-deaf man. Luckily, Shen Shiliu heard him this time, and the bladder-stimulating sounds of the xun came to an abrupt stop.

Shen Shiliu squinted slightly, barely making out Chang Geng's face. "Cheeky brat, what did you call me just now?"

He was in truth only seven or eight years older than Chang Geng and as yet unmarried. Perhaps due to an inkling of self-awareness regarding his own ineptitude, Shen Shiliu was fully prepared to spend the rest of his life in impoverished bachelorhood. It was no easy task encountering this son he conveniently didn't have to raise, and so eager was he to attach himself

firmly to the boy that he would lean into his role as Chang Geng's "dad" at every opportunity.

Chang Geng ignored him and carried the bowl of medicine carefully over. "Make sure you drink this while it's hot. It's getting late. Once you're done taking your medicine, you should hurry and go to bed."

Shen Shiliu set aside the xun and accepted the bowl. "You ingrate. Is being my son really so bad? My kindness is wasted on you."

He struggled not at all with the bitterness of the medicine—clearly, he was long accustomed to the taste—and downed the bowl in a single gulp. He took a few sips of the water Chang Geng handed him, rinsing his mouth, before waving a hand to indicate that he'd had enough. "There was a market over at Changyang Pass today. I got you something interesting. Come here."

Shen Shiliu bent down and began rummaging through the hideous mess spilling across his desk. Unable to see clearly, he bent so far over that his nose nearly brushed its flat surface. Chang Geng could only say with helpless exasperation, "What are you looking for? I'll find it for you."

Then, a moment later, he couldn't help but grumble, "I'm practically grown already. Why do you keep giving me toys for little kids?"

*While you're at it, why don't you cause a little less trouble so I have more time to learn practical things*… The rest of Chang Geng's words swirled around in his head, but by the time they reached the tip of his tongue, he felt they were a little hurtful, so he left them unsaid.

As a libertine and reprobate who couldn't tell his head from a hole in the ground, it was bad enough that Shen Shiliu wasted his own time on worthless pursuits. Yet he also insisted on constantly dragging Chang Geng along with him. If he wasn't summoning him to visit the market, then he was hauling him off to ride horses. Once, he even gave Chang Geng a "puppy" he'd picked up somewhere. That time, Shen-xiansheng's face had nearly turned white with fright. Thanks to his inability to distinguish between wolf and dog, the blind man had carried home a little wolf pup.

Company Commander Xu was rarely home. He was also a reserved man, so even though he treated Chang Geng well, his interactions with his stepson were few and far between. Looking back, Chang Geng had spent

the majority of the critical time between the ages of twelve and thirteen at the side of his unreliable godfather Shen Shiliu.

Just how much focus did it take for an ignorant child to avoid being led astray by Shen Shiliu, and instead grow into such a self-assured and dignified youth?

Chang Geng simply couldn’t bear to reflect on his memories.

It went against his nature to run off and play. He planned all his actions and was hard on himself when he set his mind to something. He disliked being disturbed by others and was always deeply annoyed by Shen Shiliu’s meddling. But his anger rarely persisted. After all, Shen Shiliu didn’t use his status as Chang Geng’s godfather solely to win arguments against the boy—he genuinely loved him like a son.

One year, Chang Geng fell gravely ill, and the doctor pronounced his condition dire. As usual, Company Commander Xu was away. It was his young godfather who carried him home and stayed by his bedside for three days and nights without rest. Every time his godfather Shiliu left the house, regardless of how far he traveled or what business he had, he would bring back a little toy or some snacks for Chang Geng without fail.

Chang Geng had no love for trinkets, but he couldn’t help but love the man whose heart was constantly preoccupied with his welfare.

Every time Chang Geng saw Shiliu, he felt abnormally irritable, as if a fire was burning in his gut…but when he didn’t see him, he worried about him incessantly.

There were also times when Chang Geng considered that even though Shen Shiliu was incapable of manual labor and a failure at both the literary and martial arts, it was still possible that sooner or later some poor fool might fall for his face. Eventually, his godfather would take a wife and raise a family. Would he still concern himself with a godson once he had children of his own?

At this thought, Chang Geng’s heart suddenly constricted. Spotting a square box sitting amid the disorder on Shiliu’s desk, he shook off the wild scenarios racing through his mind and handed it to Shen Shiliu with obvious disinterest. “Is this it?”

“It’s for you. Go on—open it and take a look.”

Maybe it was a slingshot, or perhaps a packet of cheese. Either way, it definitely wasn't anything respectable. Chang Geng dutifully opened the box, scolding on instinct, "Even if you're well-off, you shouldn't spend money so carelessly. Plus, it's not like I…"

His mouth snapped shut when he saw what was inside, his eyes growing two sizes in an instant.

Lying inside the box was an iron cuff.

Iron cuffs were part of the light armor used by the military. Since they were worn on the wrist, they were convenient to carry, and were oftentimes removed from the armor and used on their own. The cuffs were typically about ten centimeters wide and could conceal three or four small knives. These knives, also known as silk darts, were made via a special process that rendered them as thin as cicada wings.

It was said that, when fired from an iron cuff using its spring mechanism, the most expertly crafted silk darts could split a single hair from a dozen meters away.

Chang Geng was pleasantly surprised. "Where…did you get this?"

"Shhh! Don't let Shen Yi hear you," Shen Shiliu cautioned. "This is no toy. If he sees it, he'll start banging on again—do you know how to use it?"

Shen-xiansheng was currently watering the flowers in the courtyard. As someone with fully functioning aural faculties, he could hear the conversation inside the room with perfect clarity. He really had no idea what to do with this hearing-impaired person who projected his own limitations onto others.

Having learned how to dismantle an entire steel suit of armor from Shen Yi, Chang Geng equipped the iron cuff with practiced hands. It was then that he discovered the unique feature of this particular weapon.

It took immense skill to forge silk darts. These weapons rarely appeared among the common folk, and those that did were second-hand goods that trickled down from the army. The cuffs were also usually made to fit full-grown adult men—yet the one Shen Shiliu had presented to Chang Geng was uncommonly small, its dimensions perfectly suited for a youth.

Seeing Chang Geng's dazed stare, Shen Shiliu knew exactly what he wanted to ask.

"The seller said it's a defective product," he explained evenly. "There's nothing wrong with it, but it's a little on the small side. No one's ever showed any interest in buying it, so I got it at a discount. I can't use it either, so it's yours. Just be careful not to hurt anyone."

Chang Geng beamed with rare delight. "Thank you so much…"

"And who are we thanking…?" Shen Shiliu prompted.

"Yifu!" Chang Geng cried happily.

"You little scoundrel. If someone gave you milk, you'd call them 'Mom.'" Slinging an arm around Chang Geng's shoulders, Shen Shiliu laughed and led him toward the door. "Go on and run home. You shouldn't be wandering around late at night during the Ghost Month."

Only then did Chang Geng remember it was the fifteenth day of the seventh month—the very day of the Ghost Festival.[7] He passed through the corner gate and walked back to his house. As he stepped through the doorway, he realized that the song Shen Shiliu had been playing on the xun was familiar. Granted, the pitch was completely off…but it vaguely resembled the tune from "A Westward Sendoff,"[8] a dirge often sung at funerals by mourners weeping before a grave.

*Was that to honor the occasion?* Chang Geng wondered in silence.

After seeing Chang Geng out, Shen Shiliu spent a long while with his head bowed before he finally managed to make out the shape of the threshold. He carefully stepped over the doorsill and closed the gate behind him. Shen-xiansheng, who had been waiting for him in the courtyard, took him by the elbow and guided him into the house with a blank expression.

"An iron cuff made from top-quality black iron with three silk darts personally forged by Master Qiu Tianlin himself," Shen-xiansheng said. "And since the master's death, this particular model has been discontinued indefinitely…what priceless defective products, indeed."

Shiliu didn't respond.

“Enough already.” Shen-xiansheng continued, “Stop playing dumb with me. Do you really intend to raise him as your son?”

“Of course. I like that kid. He’s righteous and kind,” Shiliu finally spoke up. “Most likely that is a certain someone’s intention as well. If I really did end up adopting him in the future, those other folks would be able to relax. His life would be easier, too. Wouldn’t that be a win for everyone?”

Shen-xiansheng fell silent. After a spell, he said quietly, “You need to make sure he doesn’t hate you first. Aren’t you even slightly worried?”

Smiling, Shen Shiliu hiked up the hem of his robe, pushed the door open, and stepped into his room. With a despicable expression on his face, he said, “There are plenty of people who hate me—what’s one more?”

That night, as lanterns floated downriver, the souls of the departed drifted their way back home.

In the dark of early morning before the fifth night watch,[9] Chang Geng awoke in a restless heat. His back was clammy with a thin film of sweat, and his undergarments were sticky and wet. Even young boys who had someone to guide them through this aspect of adolescence often met it with panic and confusion. Yet Chang Geng was neither panicked nor confused, but strangely indifferent. He sat in a daze for several seconds before rising to clean up with an air of apathy and the slightest hint of disgust on his face.

He went out and fetched a tub of cold water. After scrubbing his maturing body from head to toe, he grabbed a neat stack of folded clothes from beside his pillow and got dressed. He reached for the cup of tea he had left out the night before and drained it in a single gulp, then commenced his studies as usual.

Chang Geng didn’t know what others’ first experiences were like, but in his case, he didn’t actually have an erotic dream.

He had dreamed of a heavy snowstorm beyond the pass. The air was so cold, it could freeze someone to death.

That day, it was as though the wind had grown a layer of white fur as it whipped past with merciless violence. The blood from his wounds hardly spilled out before it was frozen into shards of ice. The snarls of wolves drew closer and closer, yet their cold-dulled noses couldn’t detect the coppery scent of blood. Every inhale delivered only a gasp of salty-sweet, bone-chilling air. Chang Geng’s arms and legs were frozen, yet his lungs burned with fire. He was certain he’d be torn to pieces in the snow, with no body left to find.

But it didn’t happen.

When he came to, he found himself wrapped in a large coat and carried in a stranger’s arms. He remembered that person’s collar had been snow-white, and their body smelled faintly of bitter medicine. When they saw he was awake, they asked no questions, but merely produced a pot of wine and fed him a mouthful.

Chang Geng didn’t know what kind of wine it was, and he had never tasted it again since. Back then, his only thought had been that it was even stronger than the baijiu from beyond the pass. It felt like a ball of fire rolling down his throat, a single swallow igniting all the blood in his body.

That person was Shiliu.

The dream was so clear, it felt as though Shiliu’s arms were still wrapped around his body. Chang Geng had spent many hours pondering it, but he remained perplexed. Wasn’t that man an invalid? How could his arms be so steady and strong in that terrifying landscape of ice and snow?

Chang Geng glanced down at the iron cuff encircling his wrist. He didn’t know how it was made, but despite being pressed against his body for an entire night, it hadn’t warmed up at all. Availing himself of the cold iron’s chill, Chang Geng waited quietly for his agitated heart and raging blood to slow. Sneering slightly, he flung the ridiculous idea that he might have had a wet dream about his godfather out of his mind, lit a lamp, and set about his studies in earnest.

At that moment, there came a deep rumble far off in the distance, shaking the ground and the tiny room with it. Chang Geng started in surprise before he remembered. Counting the days, it was about time for the giant kite that had gone on patrol north of the border to return.

The giant kite was a large ship over one thousand five hundred meters long. A pair of wings made up of thousands upon thousands of fire pinions emerged from the top. When the giant kite took flight, these pinions expelled a dreamy sea of billowing white steam, as high as a surging tide. Each fire pinion was inset with a rice-bowl-sized chunk of violet gold that glimmered with reddish-purple light as it burned within the shroud of mist. At first glance, the ship looked like a city of twinkling lights.

The northern barbarian tribes surrendered and began paying tribute to Great Liang fourteen years ago. Since then, a dozen or so giant kites would set sail from each of the major border towns on the fifteenth of the first month every year to patrol the north. The flight of the great kites was a deliberate show of might. They sailed predetermined routes across the sky, observing every movement of the barbarians in minute detail from above. In addition to performing functions of deterrence and inspection, the giant kites also transported the annual tribute gifts from each of the northern barbarian tribes back to the imperial court. Chief among these tributes was violet gold.

When a single giant kite fully loaded with nearly half a million kilograms of violet gold returned to port, even its footsteps sounded several times heavier than when it left. The explosive sounds of fire pinions expelling air as the kite cleaved through the sky were audible several dozen kilometers away.

The giant kites had embarked on their northern patrols during the first month of the year. Now, as the molten heat of the seventh month passed its peak, they returned home.

# Chapter 3:
# Famous General

THE XU FAMILY FOREBEARS had passed down a bit of land to their descendants. That, combined with the fact that Company Commander Xu was from a military family, meant he was considered well-off by local standards. Though his household was meager, they had the means to hire a maidservant to do the cooking, cleaning, and other domestic tasks.

The Xu family's old kitchen maid slowly finished preparing breakfast as the sky began to lighten. She knocked on the door of Chang Geng's study. "Young master," she said, "the madam asked whether you would be joining her in her room for breakfast."

Chang Geng was completely absorbed in practicing his calligraphy, but when he heard this, his hand stilled. Then, just as always, he said, "I'll pass. She likes peace and quiet, so I wouldn't want to bother her. Please send along my greetings and let her know I hope she's doing well."

The old kitchen maid was unsurprised by his response. This daily question and answer session between the mother and son was a routine affair.

But honestly, it was strange. Company Commander Xu was nothing more than a stepfather, while Chang Geng and Xiu-niang were related by blood. Yet it was only during the handful of days when Company Commander Xu resided at home that this mother and son put on a pantomime of parental compassion and filial piety. Only then did Chang Geng come to eat at the same table and greet his parents in the mornings and evenings. The moment the master left the house, their relationship became colder and more distant than strangers. They ignored each other's existence entirely, despite living under the same roof. Chang Geng didn't even use the front gate, choosing instead to enter and exit by the corner gate every day as he went next door. It wasn't unusual for weeks to go by without mother and son crossing paths.

Even the year Chang Geng suffered that perilous illness, Xiu-niang showed no concern and only paid him a brief visit. She cared not a whit

whether her only son lived or died. Instead, it had been Master Shiliu who carried the child home and nursed him back to health.

The old kitchen maid always wondered whether perhaps Xiu-niang wasn't Chang Geng's birth mother, but the mother and son bore such a strong physical resemblance that they were most certainly related by blood. Besides, would a delicate, defenseless woman—one who could barely protect herself as she wandered so far from home—continue looking after this child if she hadn't given birth to him?

It didn't make any logical sense.

The old kitchen maid brought a partitioned box laden with food to Chang Geng. "It seems the master will be back in town today. The madam requests that you return home early."

Chang Geng knew what she meant. With Company Commander Xu back, they would have to perform the whole song and dance as usual. He nodded. "I understand."

As Chang Geng's eyes fell upon the box of food, he noticed a long strand of hair sullying its handle. He immediately withdrew the hand he had extended to accept the box. The old kitchen maid's hair had already gone white, so this long strand of soft black hair was not hers. Company Commander Xu had yet to return, so between the family and the servants, there were only three living souls. If the hair didn't belong to the old kitchen maid, it could only belong to Xiu-niang.

Chang Geng had a peculiar obsession with cleanliness—one that only applied to Xiu-niang.

He was perfectly fine eating leftovers from his godfather's bowl when he dined next door, but when he was at home, he refused to take so much as a bite out of anything Xiu-niang had touched. The old kitchen maid was aware of this quirk of his character and hastily removed the strand of hair. Smiling apologetically, she said, "This was accidentally left behind on the box by the madam. Please rest assured, no one has touched the pastries since I took them out of the oven."

Chang Geng smiled politely back at her. "Of course. It just so happens that I have a few questions I need to ask Shen-xiansheng today. I'll head over to my yifu's house to eat later."

In the end, he refused to take the food. Collecting his books, he tucked them under his arm, grabbed his sword from where it hung behind the door, and left without another word.

Next door, Shen-xiansheng stood in the courtyard with his sleeves rolled up. He was in the middle of oiling several disassembled suits of steel armor.

This armor had been sent from the garrison soldiers. The troops stationed at Yanhui Town had their own artificers who specialized in maintaining military armor, but there was so much equipment that they always had their hands full. Thus, they also recruited artificers from among the civilians to help out as needed.

Artificers were tradesmen who spent all their time fixing armor and engines or dealing with those big iron fellows. They could technically be considered craftsmen, but to ordinary folks, theirs was a lowly profession no different from a doorkeeper, pedicurist, or barber. Although those who chose this occupation never had to worry about putting food on the table, it wasn't a particularly reputable job. It was difficult to say what drew a scholarly man like Shen-xiansheng to such an odd occupation. Not only did he enjoy fiddling around with gadgets in his spare time, he often stooped to dabbling in the trade to earn some pocket change.

Shen Shiliu, that inadvertent trespasser in teenage dreams, was presently sitting on the threshold with his long legs outstretched and his body slumped bonelessly against the doorframe. An empty medicine bowl rested beside him—he didn't even know to wash it out after using it.

Stretching lethargically, Shiliu waved a listless hand at Chang Geng as he entered and commanded, "Son, fetch me a jar of wine."

"Ignore him," Shen-xiansheng said to Chang Geng. His hands were streaked with engine grease, and he was drenched in sweat. "Have you eaten yet?"

"Not yet."

Shen-xiansheng turned to bark at Shiliu, "All you've done since getting up this morning is loaf around and wait to be fed! Can't you make yourself useful? Go wash rice and make us some congee!"

Shen Shiliu tilted his head to the side, affecting the perfect degree of deafness as he said in an exasperatingly even tone, “Huh? What?”

“I’ll do it.” Chang Geng was accustomed to this. “Which rice should I use?”

This time, Shiliu heard them. Raising his long, slender eyebrows, he said to Shen-xiansheng, “Stop ordering the kid around. Why don’t *you* do it?”

Shen-xiansheng was a gentle and refined scholar, but every day, his ruinous scoundrel of a younger brother infuriated him so much his entire face seemed to blaze with holy fire. “Didn’t we agree to take turns? It’s not your fault you can’t hear, but as a grown man, why do you never keep your word?!”

Trotting out the same old trick, Shen Shiliu once again “failed to hear” and turned to Chang Geng, “What’s he yapping about?”

Chang Geng was speechless. Honestly, being deaf was remarkably convenient.

“He said…” Chang Geng dropped his head down and met Shiliu’s playful gaze head-on. For a split second, scenes from last night’s dream flashed before his eyes. He suddenly realized that he wasn’t as indifferent as he thought. Chang Geng’s throat went a bit dry. He composed himself hastily and said with a blank expression, “You’d better sit still, old man. Don’t act so shameless first thing in the morning.”

Shen Shiliu hadn’t had time to drink himself into a stupor yet today, so what little conscience he retained had yet to be soaked into draff. Beaming, he grabbed Chang Geng’s hand and used it to pull himself to standing. He patted the youth intimately on the back of the head and tottered unsteadily into the kitchen. Surprisingly, he really was getting ready to work. This was a rare phenomenon, witnessing Master Shiliu doing something productive—an uncommon occurrence comparable to flowers blossoming on an iron tree.[10]

Chang Geng hurried in after him, only to see his godfather strut over and carelessly grab a handful of rice, which he tossed into a pot. With a series of splashes, he ladled some water to wash the rice, splattering wet droplets everywhere in the process. Then, he deigned to stick two fingers in

the pot, stirring briefly before pulling them out and flicking off beads of water. “The rice has been half washed,” he announced. “Now, get over here, Shen Yi. It’s your turn.”

Shen-xiansheng couldn’t think of a thing to say.

Shen Shiliu grabbed the jar of wine sitting atop the stove with a sweep of his hand and tipped his head to take a large swig. His movements were as smooth as drifting clouds and flowing water, perfectly precise in execution… Sometimes, Chang Geng suspected that even his godfather’s supposed blindness was faked.

Perhaps Shen-xiansheng had given up. He resigned himself to his fate and washed his hands with a chunk of honey locust soap, cursing the whole time. He darted into the kitchen to set up a steamer basket for the pastries and began to clean up the mess Shiliu left behind. Meanwhile, Chang Geng took out the pieces of calligraphy he had traced earlier that morning and showed them to Shen-xiansheng one by one. As Shen Yi finished providing his commentary, Chang Geng stuffed each sheet of paper into the stove to feed the fire.

“I can tell you’ve been working hard recently; your writing has improved quite a bit,” Shen-xiansheng said. “I see you’ve been tracing a rubbing of the Marquis of Anding Gu Yun’s ‘Roadside Pavilion Inscription’?”

“Mmhm,” Chang Geng affirmed.

Shiliu had been idling at the side, but upon hearing this, he turned around. An odd expression flickered across his face.

Shen-xiansheng’s head remained bowed. “The Marquis of Anding was fifteen years old when he led his first troops and made his name with a single battle. At the age of seventeen, he assumed command of the Western Campaign. As the army passed by a resting place on the outskirts of Xiliang City, he saw the ancient remains left behind by our forefathers. Although it has been over a century since the founding of our great nation, we can still look upon the scenery of previous dynasties. Moved by this thought, he wrote ‘Rhapsody on the Roadside Pavilion.’ The poem would have likely been quickly forgotten, if some bootlickers among his ranks hadn’t secretly saved it and had it inscribed on a stele.

“Gu Yun received personal instruction in calligraphy from the greatest scholar of our time, Mosen-xiansheng, so there are certainly merits to be gleaned from studying his penmanship. However, he was very young when he wrote the ‘Rhapsody on the Roadside Pavilion.’ Having achieved such momentous success at such a young age, he inevitably had a rather exaggerated and immature opinion of his own abilities. There are so many rubbings of ancient inscriptions you could copy if you want to practice your writing. Why did you choose a living person’s inscription?”

Chang Geng rolled up the ink-covered paper and shoved it remorselessly into the fire. “I heard that under the former marquis’s command, the Black Iron Battalion’s Black Hawk, Black Carapace, and Black Steed Divisions wiped out the Eighteen Barbarian Tribes. Later, when his son inherited his title and command, the battalion forced the surrender of the raiders in the Western Regions. It’s not that I like his calligraphy especially. I was just curious to see the handwriting of the commander of the Black Iron Battalion.”

Shen-xiansheng continued mechanically stirring the pot with the ladle in his hand, but his eyes drifted away. After a long moment, he said slowly, “The Marquis of Anding’s given name is Gu Yun. The courtesy name given to him when he came of age is Zixi. He is the only son of the late emperor’s eldest daughter and the former Marquis of Anding. His parents died when he was still a child, so His Majesty took pity on him and raised him in the imperial palace. His Majesty also conferred a special title of nobility on him. As a born aristocrat, he could have spent his days idling away in riches and comfort, yet he insisted on going to the Western Regions to feast on sand. I don’t know if I’d call him a hero; there might very well be a screw or two loose in his head.”

Shen-xiansheng was wearing an old robe stained at the hem with armor grease and faded white from too many washings. An unfortunate-looking apron hung from his neck. The brothers scraped by a day at a time without a single woman in the house, each man more disgraceful than the next. As for the apron, it was difficult to say whether it had been washed even once since falling into their hands. The garment’s original color was impossible to make out, and it looked entirely out of place wrapped around Shen-xiansheng’s body.

Only his face was well-defined. Shen Yi had a high nose bridge, so when he stopped joking around, his profile had a cold and almost menacing aura. With a twitch of his eyelids, he said, “Since the former marquis passed away, the Black Iron Battalion has achieved too many great things. It makes those in power uneasy. Add to this the fact that there are many sycophantic courtiers eager to curry favor with His Majesty running amok—”

“Shen Yi.” He was interrupted suddenly by Shiliu, who had been quiet all this time.

The pair standing by the stove looked over at him in unison. Shiliu was examining a tiny cobweb hanging from the door frame. He wasn’t the type to flush with wine; rather, his face seemed to turn paler the more he drank. What little emotion he possessed seemed to pool in his eyes, and it was difficult to read his mood.

“Don’t talk nonsense,” he said softly.

The Shen brothers never placed much importance on seniority. The younger frequently disrespected the elder, while the elder went to extremes doting on the younger. They spent every day quarreling from morning till evening, but they were always very affectionate toward each other.

Chang Geng had never heard Shiliu speak with such severity. The boy was a naturally sensitive person. Though he didn’t understand what was going on, he frowned deeply.

Shen Yi gritted his teeth for a moment before noticing that Chang Geng was watching him. Restraining his emotions with difficulty, he said with a smile, “Excuse me for misspeaking—but isn’t slandering the imperial court the perfect small talk to accompany a meal? I was just saying.”

Sensing the awkwardness in the air, Chang Geng cleverly changed the topic. “So then, who was in charge of the Black Iron Battalion in the ten years between the Northern Expedition and the Western Campaign?”

“No one,” Shen Yi said. “Things were quiet with the Black Iron Battalion for a while. Some soldiers left, others died. Most of the veterans who continued to serve grew disheartened at being left to languish. Over the course of a decade, the elite troops of old had long been replaced with a

new generation of soldiers. What's more, their equipment hadn't seen an upgrade in years and had become completely obsolete.

"That was the situation until a few years ago, when the rebellion broke out in the Western Regions. In their time of crisis, the imperial court was left with no other choice: they allowed the Marquis of Anding to take the reins and revive the Black Iron Battalion. Rather than saying that Marshal Gu led the Black Iron Battalion, it would be more accurate to say he forged a new cadre of elite troops in the Western Regions. If you have the opportunity, you may try studying his current calligraphy."

Chang Geng was a bit taken aback. "Could it be that Shen-xiansheng has seen later writings of the Marquis of Anding?"

Shen Yi smiled. "It's exceedingly rare, but every now and then you'll see a scroll or two in the bookshops that claim to be his authentic writings. Whether they're real or not is not something I can discern."

As he spoke, he blew at the white steam emanating from the cooking pot, then began carrying food over to the table. Chang Geng tactfully stepped forward to help, but as he brushed past Shen Shiliu with the congee, the invalid's hand shot out to grasp his shoulder.

Chang Geng had hit his growth spurt early and was taller and bigger than most boys his age. Although his body had yet to fill out, he was already nearly as tall as his young godfather and could look directly into Shiliu's eyes with the slightest lift of his chin. Shiliu had a pair of quintessential peach blossom eyes—gently curved, with the outer corners tilting subtly upward—but their alluring shape was only noticeable when his gaze softened and flitted this way and that. That was because whenever his eyes were focused, it was as though his pupils contained a pair of mist-shrouded chasms so dark they were fathomless.

Chang Geng's heart tripped in his chest. Dropping his voice, he deliberately reached for that moniker he so rarely used. "Yifu, what's wrong?"

"You're just a kid, so stop daydreaming about becoming a hero," Shiliu said absent-mindedly. "Do heroes ever get happy endings? As long as you have food to eat and clothes to wear, as long as you can sleep without worrying about the next day, that's already the best life you can possibly live. Even if it's boring, even if you're hard up, you'll be okay."

Shiliu spent most of his time pretending to be deaf and mute, and very rarely uttered anything of value. Now he'd finally opened his mouth just to rain on Chang Geng's parade. As a half-blind, half-deaf cripple, it was only natural for this man to lack ambition and drive. But how could a young boy bear to listen to such resigned, demoralizing talk?

Chang Geng felt that Shiliu was looking down on him. Disgruntled, he thought, *If we all fritter away our time like you, who will support the household in the future? Who will care for you and make sure you have food to eat and clothes to wear? It's much easier said than done*.

Ducking out from under Shiliu's hand, he said shortly, "Stop messing around. You'll burn yourself on the congee."

# Chapter 4:
# Giant Kite

THE SHEN FAMILY wasn't particular about things like not speaking during meals, so while they ate, Shen-xiansheng taught Chang Geng a lesson from the Confucianist text *Great Learning*. He wandered off topic as he talked, eventually meandering all the way to the issue of how to maintain a suit of armor in the winter. He was a Syncretist to begin with and advocated for many schools of thought, so he expounded on whatever came to mind. Once, for some inexplicable reason, he'd even treated Chang Geng to an enthusiastic lecture on the prevention of equine plague. That time, even the deaf Master Shiliu couldn't bear it anymore and told him to shut up.

As the meal and conversation came to a close, Shen-xiansheng, who had yet to speak his fill, began reluctantly clearing up the dishes. "I have to finish repairing those suits of heavy armor today. They never maintain them properly, so some of the joints have rusted through." He turned to Chang Geng, "I might go out in the afternoon to gather some medicinal herbs. Ge Pangxiao and the others asked for today off so that they could go play. What about you? What are your plans?"

"I'm gonna head over to General's Slope and practice—" Chang Geng started.

Before the words "with my sword" could leave his mouth, Shen Shiliu had already hung Chang Geng's iron sword on the wall and announced, "Son, let's go. The giant kite is about to return. We should get in on the fun."

Chang Geng protested in vain, "Yifu, I was just telling Shen-xiansheng that I…"

Shen Shiliu asked, "What was that? Speak louder."

Great, there he went again.

The giant kite came and went every single year. Chang Geng couldn't imagine what could possibly be any different about this one. But before he

could object, Shiliu had already pulled him out of his seat, dragged him across the room, and shoved him unceremoniously out the door. The summer heat had yet to subside, so everyone was wearing thin garments. Chang Geng could feel Shiliu's whole body pressed up against his back, enveloping him in a faint medicinal fragrance…just like in his dream.

For some inexplicable reason, Chang Geng began to feel uneasy. He furtively lowered his head and shied away from his young godfather, then covered his nose and turned, pretending to sneeze. Grinning brightly, Shiliu teased, "There's someone out there thinking of you. Could it be that round-faced little girl from Old Wang's house?"

Chang Geng couldn't hold back his displeasure any longer. "Yifu," he said stiffly, "don't you think it's inappropriate to crack these sorts of jokes with your juniors?"

Shen Shiliu didn't take a word he said seriously. "Inappropriate?" He smiled mischievously, "Ah well, I've never been a dad before, so I don't know anything about appropriate behavior. I'll be more careful in the future."

Anyone who attempted to speak earnestly with Shen Shiliu was guaranteed to end up blowing a fuse. Chang Geng shook off the arm this layabout tried to sling over his shoulder and strode off ahead, leaving Shiliu behind.

Behind them, Shen-xiansheng called out a warning. "Shiliu, make sure you come home early and chop the firewood!"

Shen Shiliu slipped out the door so quickly it was as though his feet had been smeared with oil. Shamelessly, he called back, "Can't hear you! See you later!"

With Shiliu shoving at him from behind, Chang Geng was forced to jog the entire way. "When exactly do you actually struggle to hear?" he asked.

Shen Shiliu merely smiled, his expression profoundly mysterious.

Just as the two were passing the front entrance of Chang Geng's home, the gate creaked open.

A woman in a long, plain dress stepped out. The moment he saw her, the exasperation on Chang Geng's face froze over. It was as if he had been splashed with a bucket of ice water, drenching him from head to toe. His eyes, which had been burning with barely suppressed anger only seconds ago, were hollow, whatever spark of life they previously held doused in an instant alongside his ire.

This woman was Xiu-niang, Chang Geng's mother, if only in name.

Although she was no longer young, her loveliness hadn't faded at all. Standing in the first rays of the morning sun, she looked like a gently refined and serene beauty who had stepped out of a painting. Even if she was a widow, it was plainly insulting to send such a woman to the borderlands to become the wife of an insignificant company commander.

Xiu-niang nodded a salutation, dipping her body toward Shen Shiliu in a graceful curtsy. "Master Shiliu," she said politely.

Shen Shiliu only acted disgracefully when he was around Shen Yi. Whenever he encountered women, he transformed into an elegant gentleman. Turning slightly to the side to avoid looking directly at Xiu-niang's face, he greeted her with impeccable courtesy, "Madam Xu. I'm taking Chang Geng out to play."

"Thank you for your trouble." Xiu-niang's mouth curved slightly in a restrained smile that revealed no teeth. She turned toward Chang Geng. "Your father is returning today," she reminded him softly. "If you're going out, remember to bring back a box of rouge for me."

Her voice was as light as the humming of a mosquito, easily scattered by a single exhale. But before Chang Geng could respond, Shen the Deaf had already beaten him to the punch and agreed on his behalf. "Worry not, my lady, you can count on us."

Chang Geng had no words.

It was at this moment that he arrived at a rough idea of one of his godfather's rules with respect to his deafness. He couldn't hear a single thing Shen Yi said, but with others, there was a degree of selectivity: it depended on whether he wanted to hear them or not. When it came to single young ladies who'd come of age and young married women, even if it was

the brief buzzing of a female mosquito, he was capable of hearing them without missing a single word.

It wasn't enough that he was a lazy glutton—he was also a lecherous skirt-chaser! The man's good looks and gentlemanly conduct were a scam; it was as though the expression "all that glitters is not gold" had been coined specifically to describe him.

On the day the giant kite returned, gaggles of children waiting to collect goose feed and onlookers from nearby villages all congregated near the town gates. With so many people gathered in one place, it was only natural that enterprising minds would see an opportunity to peddle their wares. Thus, a large market known to the locals as the Gosling Market gradually formed.

Shen Shiliu never paid much attention to other people's moods, and even if he did notice, he acted as if he didn't. He gave no indication of having sensed his godson's murky feelings as he wandered enthusiastically back and forth through the overcrowded Gosling Market, utterly fascinated by everything he saw.

Despite his consternation, Chang Geng had no choice but to follow closely behind him. He was constantly on high alert lest he lose his godfather in the tightly packed crowd.

The world was in a state of turmoil in recent years. The people were poor, and most of the wares on the market were the homemade goods of peasant families. There was nothing good to eat and nothing good to drink. All in all, it was a terribly boring affair. It was commonly held that war was the reason times were lean and taxes increased year by year. But there had been wars in the past, and those wars had always been followed by a period of recovery after the fighting ended. War was over, yet for some reason, in the past few years, the people never seemed to have time to catch their breath.

In only twenty years, Great Liang had first launched the Northern Expedition, then initiated the Western Campaign. How majestic this country was—a vast empire blessed by the heavens, with emissaries flocking from all corners of the world to pay respect to its great sovereign.

Yet, somehow, its people only became poorer and poorer. It was truly mystifying.

Chang Geng was so bored wandering around the market that he stifled a yawn. He could hardly wait for Shen Shiliu, the country bumpkin fascinated by anything and everything he saw, to finish enjoying himself. He'd much rather assist Shen-xiansheng with his work if it meant he could head back earlier.

Shen Shiliu bought a bag of pitch-black salted beans, which he ate as he walked along. As if he'd sprouted eyes in the back of his head, he reached back with perfect accuracy and shoved a salted bean directly into Chang Geng's mouth. Caught by surprise, Chang Geng accidentally licked his finger and, in his ensuing panic, bit down on the inside of his mouth, immediately drawing blood. Chang Geng hissed with pain and glared furiously at Shen Shiliu, the bane of his existence.

"Flowers may bloom time and again, but humans can never relive their youth." Shen Shiliu didn't look back. Selecting another bean, he held it up to the sun. His hands were very beautiful. Slender and fair, they resembled the hands of the young master of an aristocratic family, fit for holding a scroll or a weiqi piece. They seemed completely at odds with such ashy-black roasted beans.

"You'll understand once you're a little older," Shen Shiliu said sagely. "A person's youth is as tiny and insignificant as this bean. It disappears in the blink of an eye, never to return. Later you'll realize just how much time you squandered on useless endeavors."

How Shen Shiliu had the face to speak so shamelessly of squandering time on useless endeavors was completely beyond Chang Geng's comprehension.

Just then, a flurry of cheers erupted from the crowd gathered around the town gates. Even someone half-blind could see the giant kite bearing down upon the horizon in the distance. It was back!

Countless fire pinions pointed skywards, expelling a thousand billowy peaks of white steam like a wad of cotton falling from the ninth heaven. The faint outline of an enormous ship's bow emerged from within the expanse of rippling mist. Eight deceptively lifelike flood dragons curled against the side of the ship, glaring with unparalleled disdain as they pushed through the clouds.

Starting in surprise, Shen Shiliu turned to listen. The cinnabar mole on his earlobe flashed with red light. Frowning slightly, he muttered, “Why is the ship so light this year?”

The area was filled with the deafening rumble of the giant kite and the cacophonous shouting of the crowd, and this mutter, soft as a sigh, soon disappeared without a trace. Even Chang Geng, who was following close behind, failed to hear it.

Children raised their little bamboo baskets and jostled for position as they waited to collect goose feed. A group of soldiers came jogging out onto the town walls in formation, and a messenger stood beside the ten-meter-tall copper squall, awaiting orders.

The squall looked like a giant copper horn that had been set on its side atop the town wall. It was covered in a layer of irregularly patterned dark green verdigris resembling decorative scrollwork. The messenger took a deep breath and blew into one end of the copper squall, issuing a long, sustained note. The sound was amplified several dozen times, reverberating unceasingly like a great bell.

“THE GOOSE HAS RETURNED, UNSEAL THE RIVER.”

The two ranks of soldiers grabbed hold of the crank handles on the giant wooden wheel attached to the gate tower. With a collective shout, they all began to push, their rippling muscles on clear display as their naked torsos strained with the effort. As the giant wooden wheel creaked into motion, the limestone walkway below the gate tower split in two. Countless interlocked gears turned, and the bricks on both sides separated, pulling back in opposite directions.

The earth split open, revealing the deep underground river that ran under the entirety of Yanhui Town.

The messenger’s somber, drawn-out call echoed forth from the copper squall, its sound penetrating through all in its path before drifting into the distance. There came a responding call from the giant kite. Then, the countless fire pinions burst into action as the surrounding blanket of steam began to swirl furiously—the ship was preparing for landing.

The first batch of goose feed fell from the sky like flowers scattered by a celestial maiden. The children below scrambled like mad, all of them

reaching out to snatch the food.

Sadly, the time allotted for tossing goose feed was all too short. Moments later, the giant kite alighted onto the underground river, landing safely on the surface of the water before the eyes of the crowd. The hull of the ship was terribly forbidding, the cold metal glimmering with a strange, murderous aura. The bugle call that issued from it was indescribably sorrowful, the mournful note reverberating on and on until it resonated throughout the entirety of Yanhui Town. It was as though the souls of those who had died in battle over millennia had all awoken from their slumber and joined their voices in song.

The giant kite followed the underground river steadily into town, the water splashing loudly against its sides. The voice of the messenger rang out once again.

“EXTINGUISH THE LIGHTS.”

The giant kite responded by dousing its fire pinions. A vaguely burnt smell like that of firecrackers permeated the air. As the giant kite rode the current of the river, the dragons curled along its hull seemed to transform. The beasts became totems frozen in time, their figures marked by a wicked divinity. Chang Geng stood in the thronging crowd, watching the giant kite draw nearer. Although he said he didn’t want to come, and it was true that he had seen the giant kite return to port on multiple occasions, he still found himself awe-struck by the enormous creature when faced with such a scene.

If the giant kites dispatched on the northern patrol were this impressive, then how much more magnificent might the nation’s greatest weapon, the Black Iron Battalion, be?

As a young boy trapped in such a remote corner of the world as Yanhui Town, he could scarcely begin to imagine it.

As the giant kite approached, Chang Geng’s senses were assaulted by the residual heat from the extinguished fire pinions. He reached out to grab the person beside him, warning, “The giant kite’s coming. There’re way too many people here. Let’s step back a bit.”

There was no response—his hand met empty air. Turning back, Chang Geng realized that his annoying godfather had, at some unknown point in time, disappeared without a trace.

# Chapter 5:
# Xiu-Niang

STRAINING TO STAND ON HIS TIPTOES, Chang Geng looked over the crowd and shouted, “Shiliu!”

Again, there was no response. The crowd of people chasing after the giant kite swelled. Some cheered, while others cried, “It’s coming!” Still others yelled indignantly, “Stop pushing!”

Buffeted by the crowd, Chang Geng grew increasingly furious. Seething with anger, he bellowed, “Yifu!”

The sea of people surged alongside the underground river. In no time at all, Chang Geng’s forehead was drenched with sweat from struggling against the tide as he searched for his godfather. What little excitement he had felt from seeing the giant kite had vanished entirely. Just how many years would he shave off his life dealing with such a troublesome godfather?

*Shen Shiliu really is just a wastrel with nothing better to do*, Chang Geng thought angrily to himself. *He could have done anything on such a sweltering day, yet he insisted on coming out to join the crowd!*

At that moment, someone let out a piercing scream. “Stop pushing! Someone fell in the river!”

Chang Geng instinctively looked in the direction of the scream, but all he could see was that the crowd by the river had become frenzied.

“My god, how did someone fall in?!”

“Go fetch the guard on duty! Quick!”

“Step aside! Let me through! I can’t get out, it’s too—”

Chang Geng was about to make way for the people trying to squeeze their way out of the crowd when he distantly heard someone say, “Master Shiliu, be careful!”

A chill ran down Chang Geng’s spine. Wondering whether he had misheard due to overwrought nerves, he hurried forward and grabbed hold

of one of the people trying to squeeze their way back from the riverside. “Who fell? Was it Shen Shiliu?”

Who could say whether that person heard Chang Geng’s question clearly or not. He nodded, distracted. “I think so—just let me out first.”

A ringing sound roared through Chang Geng’s ears. Bathed in the searing wave of heat from the giant kite, his back broke out in an incongruous layer of cold sweat. Sucking in a deep breath, he shoved people aside as he sped like the wind to the bank of the river. He stumbled the last few steps and only managed to steady himself by grabbing hold of the railing. Craning his neck, he looked down in a panic to find that there was indeed someone floundering desperately in the water.

The surface of the underground river lay some twenty meters below ground-level. The river was so deep that it was impossible to see the bottom at a glance, yet even so far below, it gave off a deep chill. As towering white waves sliced through the water, the person in the river seemed like a bit of duckweed floating helplessly along, with no way to exert any force against the currents. It was impossible to hear any movement, much less identify who had fallen.

Chang Geng stripped off his outer robe in a single motion. “Let me through. Excuse me, let me through!”

“You can’t just jump in like that!” someone shouted from beside him, “Someone hurry and get this kid a rope!”

A member of the crowd hastily shoved a length of rope into Chang Geng’s hands. Gripping the rope, Chang Geng glanced up at the giant kite looming overhead before diving down into the water without hesitation.

“Hold on tight! Hurry up! Hurry up! Once the giant kite comes, they’ll get swept away!”

The incoming ship raised a wave nearly two meters high. Chang Geng had only just jumped into the water when he was struck in the chest by the surging tide, the pressure shoving his breath back down his throat. He choked on a mouthful of water and was nearly swept away. Hastily tightening his grip on the rope cast down from the riverbank above, he scrubbed a hand over his face.

The sound of rushing water coupled with the roar of the giant kite as it slowed thundered in Chang Geng's ears. His entire field of vision was filled with white waves. Faintly, he could hear the voices of people shouting from the shore, "Stop feeding him rope! The giant kite's coming! Hurry up and pull that kid out, we're out of time!"

"Wait!" Chang Geng yelled.

But the water was so loud, he couldn't even hear himself shouting. He could only wave frantically at the people standing ashore and signal to them not to pull in the rope. At the same time, he was doing all he could to swim toward the place where the crashing waves were most ferocious. In the maelstrom of the water, someone grabbed onto his fumbling hand. Chang Geng had no time to think. Locking his own hand tightly around that person's wrist, he pulled them into his arms. Before he could see who it was, the giant kite was already bearing down on them with a deafening rumble.

The people standing ashore had waited as long as they dared. The coarse rope tightened sharply around Chang Geng's waist. There was a powerful tug, and Chang Geng's body suddenly felt weighed down as the men on the riverbank worked together to haul them out of the water. Only when he broke through the surface did Chang Geng sense that the body in his arms was too light. Hastily blinking away the water clinging to his lashes, Chang Geng realized with a flash of understanding that the person he had dragged out of the water wasn't Shen Shiliu at all, but a twelve-year-old kid—it was that sham of a girl, Cao Niangzi.

A long bugle call rang out from the giant kite, piercing Chang Geng's eardrums. Ears ringing, Chang Geng had no time to think. With a great shout, he pushed the half-drowned Cao Niangzi ashore.

The crowd on the riverbank clamored and cried as they pulled the pair of youths out of the water, but they were too slow. Chang Geng's legs were still dangling beyond the bounds of the riverbank, yet the giant kite was gliding relentlessly past, a set of its fire pinions on the verge of grazing his calf. Even before the fire pinions made contact, Chang Geng felt a scorching wave of heat whip past, scouring searing lines of pain into his flesh.

"You mustn't touch the fire pinions!"

“Look out!”

Right then, a pair of pale hands reached out. Weaving through the shrill screams of the crowd, they grabbed Chang Geng by the arms and swung him bodily up in a high arc through the air. The onlookers cried out in alarm and ducked out of the way. Chang Geng felt himself nearly go flying, only to fall into someone’s arms. He sucked in a deep breath, and a medicinal fragrance immediately filled his nostrils. Chang Geng snapped his head up, the tip of his nose nearly brushing Shen Shiliu’s sharply pointed chin.

Shen Shiliu’s face was like the sky before a storm. “I look away for a single second, and you’ve gone and made a name for yourself as a troublemaker!”

Feeling as though the words had been stolen right out of his mouth, Chang Geng had no response.

“There are so many soldiers standing on the shore,” Shen Shiliu said angrily, “was there any need for a brat like you to jump to the rescue?”

Chang Geng looked at him in silence. His heart, which had been caught in his throat, crashed back into his chest, and the blood that had been dammed up there flooded back into his numb extremities. Only now did he manage to spit out that first gulp of air, which had been choking him and turning all his insides upside down while Shen Shiliu berated him. His legs felt so weak he could barely stand.

Cao Niangzi had already been carried off to the side. After coughing up some water, he was slowly beginning to regain consciousness. Seeing that the child hadn’t suffered any major injuries, Shen Shiliu picked Chang Geng up by the scruff of his neck and shouldered his way out of the crowd. He frowned deeply as he yanked Chang Geng along, so that the youth could only stumble after him. As he walked, he scolded him harshly, “You would have lost half your leg if you touched those fire pinions before they cooled down. Were you planning on limping around for the rest of your life? You arrogant little brat…”

Chang Geng shivered as he returned to his senses. Before he could get in a word edgewise, he had already listened to Shen the Deaf hypocritically accuse him of wrongdoing. Suddenly, all the anger in his

heart boiled over. Struggling to raise his head, he yelled, “I thought *you* were the one who fell in the river!”

Shen Shiliu raised one long and slender brow. “Enough with the excuses. Why would a grown man like me fall into the river for no good reason?”

Chang Geng was completely speechless.

Not only had his concern for his godfather caused a mess, but his pure heart had been taken for donkey’s offal. A surge of heat spread from his neck up to his ears, leaving behind a swath of red. He couldn’t tell if he was embarrassed or angry, but regardless, a demonic fire burned in his gut, unquenchable by earthly waters.

“Alright, enough with all the ruckus.” Shen Shiliu stroked Chang Geng’s long, damp hair. Then he removed his outer robe and wrapped it around Chang Geng’s body. “It’s too chaotic here. I’ll stop lecturing you for now, so let’s hurry home so you can get changed. Be careful you don’t catch a cold.”

How magnanimous of him!

Seething with anger, Chang Geng jerked out of Shiliu’s hold, his movements so violent his palm accidentally smacked something hard in Shiliu’s sleeve. Pain shot through the bones of his hand.

“Oh, that’s the rouge I bought just now,” Shen Shiliu said. “Remember to give this to your mother… Ay—Chang Geng, where are you going?”

Chang Geng didn’t wait for him to finish, but left him behind without another word.

In all honesty, Chang Geng knew he was throwing a silly tantrum. He had acted purely on presumption based only on words overheard in the crowd. He hadn’t even seen who it was that had fallen before jumping frantically into the water. It was little wonder he was being scolded by his godfather. But the thought of this lecherous dallier picking out rouge while Chang Geng had been panicking and anxious made his chest ache with fury. It was impossible for him to tamp down his burning anger.

Shen Shiliu rubbed his nose awkwardly, baffled by Chang Geng leaving him behind. He could only chalk it up to the fact that all boys eventually reached a temperamental age. As a first-time father, Shen Shiliu felt a bit vexed. He thought to himself, *Had I known this would happen, I would've held off on giving him the iron cuff until tomorrow. How am I going to appease him now that he's actually mad?*

He stood a short distance from the riverbank with his hands clasped behind his back. The giant kite had already sailed past him with a loud rumble, the lights on the stern flickering as the underground river drew closed in its wake. After brooding a short while, Shen Shiliu stared at those stern lights. Unlike when he usually gazed into the distance, his eyes weren't the least bit unfocused. His brow slowly creased in a frown. With a flicker of movement, he disappeared into the crowd like a fish slipping into water. His footsteps made no noise as he moved with incomparable speed, nothing at all like one who was half-blind.

Chang Geng made his way home in stuffy silence. Warm wind wafted over the ice-cold river water soaking his body, calming him slightly. The anger suffusing his face gradually faded. Chang Geng's eyes bore a strong resemblance to Xiu-niang's. There was an intensity to his features that was unusual among those who hailed from the Central Plains, yet he didn't quite look like a foreigner, either. Whatever the case, he was uniquely handsome, his face both striking and distinctive.

The moment Chang Geng stepped over the threshold of his home, he saw the old kitchen maid standing on her bound feet and peering out toward the door. Shocked by his wretched appearance, she cried, "Aiyo! What happened to you?"

"Nothing," Chang Geng said weakly. "Someone fell in the river. I helped them since I happened to be there and ended up getting soaked."

The old kitchen maid shuffled alongside him with tiny steps, nattering on, "The madam said to prepare a later dinner. I think she means to wait for the master to come home first—oh right! She asked that you go see her in her room when you got back. She said she wants to have a private chat between mother and son."

Chang Geng paused, his shoulders tensing unconsciously, then nodded with a blank expression. He returned to his rooms to change into

dry clothes, sulking as he carefully folded Shen Shiliu's outer robe and set it aside. Only then did he take the box of rouge out of his sleeve and make his way over to Xiu-niang's living quarters.

The old kitchen maid was deeply curious about this mother and son's bizarre relationship. However, she didn't dare ask questions and could only crane her neck as she crept after Chang Geng at a short distance. Upon arriving at Xiu-niang's door, Chang Geng took a moment to carefully adjust his attire. His expression was so solemn, it was as though he was about to meet a formally invited guest. Only when he was sure his appearance was perfectly in order did he knock on Xiu-niang's door and say with deference, "Mother."

A woman's cold and cheerless voice drifted out from within. "Come in."

Chang Geng pushed open the door. After stepping over the threshold, he glanced back for a brief moment, meeting the eyes of the old kitchen maid who was peeking at him from afar. Startled, she hastily looked away. When she turned back again, the door had already closed, revealing nothing.

Xiu-niang's quarters were dimly lit. The blinds of the windows facing the sun had been drawn shut. As if averse to the light, Xiu-niang sat before a vanity mirror in a dark corner of the room.

Glimpsing her from behind, Chang Geng wondered whether she had taken the wrong medicine that day. She was dressed in a pale yellow ruqun[11] and had fashioned her hair into a style worn by young, unmarried women. The years had treated her kindly—in the weak light of the room, where the shadows easily hid the slight wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, she genuinely looked like a sixteen-year-old girl.

Chang Geng was about to call out to Xiu-niang when she cut him off. "There's no one else here, so stop calling me mother. Did you buy the rouge?"

Chang Geng swallowed back the second "mother" sitting on the tip of his tongue and allowed the acid of his stomach to dissolve the syllables down into an oozing mess. He stepped forward and lightly tossed the rouge box, still warm from his hands, onto Xiu-niang's dressing table.

“This color is so pretty and bright.” Xiu-niang finally conceded a stingy smile. She dipped a finger into the box to pick up a bit of rouge and smeared it over her pale lips. After cheerfully examining her reflection in the mirror, she asked, “Do I look pretty?”

Chang Geng stood to the side with an expression of cool indifference and did not say a word. However, in the privacy of his own mind, he marveled at this rare occurrence. Why would Xiu-niang call him here? Perhaps she was bored. As he thought this, one of his eyes twitched slightly. Chang Geng at once found himself overcome with a mysterious and ominous feeling.

“Moving forward,” Xiu-niang said, “you can stop calling me mother around other people too. You see, our destiny as mother and son finally comes to an end today.”

As she spoke, she lifted her gorgeously painted face and reached out her pale, slender hands as if intending to straighten Chang Geng’s collar. Chang Geng jerked away. “What do you mean?”

# Chapter 6:
# Curse

XIU-NIANG SMILED and withdrew her hands, unbothered. Her lips were stained with the rouge bought by Shen Shiliu. The color added a touch of glamour to her pale and dignified face, making her look like a flower that had quenched its thirst with blood.

"I know you've always had your suspicions. Since we have the chance today, we might as well clear things up. It's true that I did not give birth to you," Xiu-niang said. "Now that it's out in the open, do you feel a little better?"

The corner of Chang Geng's eye twitched slightly again. He was still young, after all. He had yet to develop the shrewdness required to keep emotions from showing on his face.

Regardless of how good a friend or how dear a teacher, there was no one in the world—not even a father—who could replace a mother. It wasn't that Chang Geng did not long for a mother. But there were times when refusing to accept one's fate, despite knowing very well that it was unchangeable, was too bitter to bear. If he clung to hope, even he would find himself pitiful. There were countless times when Chang Geng had thought there was no way Xiu-niang was his birth mother, yet now that he had received such an unsurprising answer, his heart was completely hollow. His feelings were difficult to describe.

The apprehension Chang Geng felt slowly intensified. Warily, he asked, "Why are you telling me this now?"

Turning back to the mirror, Xiu-niang examined her face. Perhaps it was because she had applied too much powder, but her complexion seemed a bit wan. She carefully scraped out more rouge and daubed it evenly onto her cheeks.

"'Chang Geng' is the milk name that I gave you," Xiu-niang said. "There's a saying amongst the people of the Central Plains: *In the east, there is Qiming, and in the west, there is Changgeng.*[12] Emerging at dusk,

Changgeng is a deeply inauspicious star, giving rise to war and bloodshed. With the most noble and most filthy blood flowing through your veins, you were born to be a terrible freak of nature—no name could be more suitable."

"Wasn't I born after you were captured and raped by mountain bandits while stranded in Shanxi?" Chang Geng said coldly. "Two hands aren't enough to count the number of men who had a hand in fathering me. The son of a prostitute and a nest of bandits—how exactly do I have noble blood?"

Xiu-niang's entire body stiffened. She didn't look back, but the rouge couldn't mask the pallor of her face as a flash of pain flickered through her expressive eyes. Yet she suppressed it quickly, the emotion melting away into a sea of mad serenity.

Chang Geng's earliest memory was of a bandit's hideout high in the mountains. Xiu-niang would always lock him in a cabinet that reeked of mold. Through tiny cracks in the rotted wood, the young Chang Geng watched the drunk bandits barge into the room. Those brutish men would either beat her or have their way with her before Chang Geng's eyes.

At first, the bandits had kept a close eye on Xiu-niang, but when they saw how weak and pliant she was, they gradually relaxed their guard. Later, they even allowed her to go out and serve food alongside the other servant women in the mountain stronghold. In the end, Xiu-niang poisoned the well and several hundred jars of wine. Heaven only knew where she got her hands on so much poison.

That day, she filled a small bowl with poisoned well water and offered it to Chang Geng. But when he drank, she seemed to regret it and shoved her fingers down his throat in a desperate attempt to bring the poison back up.

Xiu-niang had stuffed the half-dead Chang Geng into a small bamboo basket, which she carried on her back. She held a steel knife in her hands, and every time she encountered a bandit who had yet to breathe their last, she stepped forward to finish them off. In Chang Geng's memory she wore a dress dyed red with blood as she doused everything with kerosene and the bandits' secret stash of violet gold, torching the entire mountaintop in a blaze of flames before leaving with him in tow.

In the short span of his life, just over a dozen years, Xiu-niang had tried to kill him on multiple occasions. She had fed him poison, stabbed him with a knife, tied him to a horse and dragged him along…there had been times when she appeared to suddenly lose her mind and attempt to smother him with blankets in the middle of the night. Yet she managed to rein in her madness every time, thereby preserving his life.

As well as a tiny, unrealistic sliver of fantasy.

Doing his utmost to maintain his composure, Chang Geng said, “You’re overthinking it. I never considered you my mother. It’s just that I always thought the reason you hated me was because I was a stain on your life left by those bandits.”

Xiu-niang sat numbly before the mirror, her complexion growing increasingly pale. After a long moment, she sighed. “Child, I’ve wronged you.”

The instant she spoke these words, all the caution and resentment in Chang Geng’s heart nearly collapsed to pieces. Only now did he realize all the wrongs he had suffered since childhood could have been resolved so easily, with such a little handful of words. Nonetheless, the fourteen-year-old youth held back his tears with all his might and instead asked in an exhausted voice, “Why are you telling me all of this? Now that you’ve found your conscience, are you planning on curing me of the poison in my body? Or are you going to kill me?”

Xiu-niang regarded the boy with astonished eyes, as if he were some sort of rare and precious implement. “You know…”

Chang Geng cut her off. “Of course I know. I’ve had nightmares every night since we settled in Yanhui Town. Even when I doze off during the day, I startle awake in fright.”

Apart from last night… For the briefest moment, Chang Geng’s thoughts scattered. He suddenly regretted his petty squabble with Shiliu.

“I have yet to accomplish anything worthwhile in my life,” Chang Geng said, “but I haven’t committed any shameful deeds either. There’s no reason for me to be haunted by so many ghosts—or is there some strange illness in this world that causes one to be plagued by nightmares night after night?”

Xiu-niang's bright red lips curved in a peculiar smile as her sluggish gaze landed on the iron cuff adorning Chang Geng's wrist. Her eyes gleamed with an intense light, as though hiding a pair of black, poison-tipped arrows in their depths. "What else do you know?"

Chang Geng instinctively tucked the iron cuff back into his sleeve. He felt it would be sullied by a single glance from her eyes.

"I also know that the wolf pack that chased me down two years ago beyond the pass didn't find me on its own; someone summoned them. You were warning me that there was no escape, that you had plenty of ways to kill me—weren't you?" Chang Geng said with quiet calm. "Only barbarians know how to control such animals. In other words, ever since we arrived in Yanhui town, you've been in contact with the barbarian tribes. My guess is you're also one of them. Once, when you locked me in that cabinet as a child, I saw a man come in and rip open your clothes. There's an image of a wolf's head on your chest."

Xiu-niang chuckled softly. "Barbarians. You actually call us *barbarians*…"

The sound of her laughter grew louder and louder until she was practically gasping for breath. Then, Xiu-niang's laughter was abruptly cut off. Clutching at her chest, she began to cough violently. Chang Geng reached out instinctively, as if wanting to help. But he quickly recovered his senses and jerked his hands back, clenching them into fists instead.

A thin rivulet of blood seeped from between Xiu-niang's fingers and landed on her pale-yellow skirt, leaving behind a ghastly splotch of purple-black. Shocked, Chang Geng stepped forward.

"You…"

Xiu-niang clutched his elbow and struggled to straighten her body, shaking like a withered leaf buffeted by cold winds. After gasping in several mouthfuls of air, she fished out half a jade pendant engraved with twin lotus flowers and mandarin ducks from beneath her dressing case. Then she shoved it, bloodstains and all, into Chang Geng's hands. Her face was snow-white, and her bloodstained lips were more garishly bright than the rouge. Staring at Chang Geng with bloodshot eyes, she said, "My name is not Xiu-niang. That is a name given to your women of the Central Plains. My name is Huge'er. It means 'the violet gold at the heart of the earth'…"

Choking on her own words, she was racked with another agonizing spate of coughs. She spat out a mouthful of blood, staining the front of Chang Geng's robes red.

"In…inauspicious violet gold." The woman's voice took on an odd sobbing quality as her breath came faster and faster. Her chest heaved like a broken bellows. "My elder sister was the goddess of the Eternal Sky. Even the Wolf God knelt before her in worship. You…you are the little freak that I raised with my own hands." She began to laugh, her breaths thin as gossamer. "No one loves you. No one treats you with sincerity…"

She fumbled for Chang Geng's wrist, sharp nails digging into his flesh as she took hold of the iron cuff. "This is a cloud wrist cuff taken from the light armor of the Black Iron Battalion—it was specially made by those black-hearted demons. Who gave this to you? Hm?"

As if burnt by her touch, Chang Geng shoved her away. The woman collapsed against the dressing table, her body convulsing as she curled in on herself. She widened her lovely phoenix eyes, revealing malevolent white around the rims.

"Your body has been afflicted by the Curse of Wu'ergu. I've given this poison the Chinese name *Chang Geng*. Isn't it…pretty?" Her cheek twitched violently as blood-flecked spittle foamed from her mouth. Her voice began to slur, but that didn't prevent Chang Geng from hearing her clearly. "The inimitable Curse of Wu'ergu. Undetectable and unbreakable… Someday, you will become the most powerful warrior the world has ever seen, but by then, you will no longer discern dream from reality… You will become a great lunatic—"

Chang Geng stood numbly in place. Those barely comprehensible words drifted past his ears, slipping in and filling the joints between his bones with icy sludge.

"The blood of the goddess also flows through my veins. May the boundless mystical powers of the Eternal Sky protect you. By…by the end of your life, may your heart be filled with only hatred and suspicion. May you become a violent lover of bloodshed and may carnage follow in your footsteps wherever you go. May you be doomed to drag all of them…to a… to a miserable…"

The word “death” stumbled as it slid from her throat. The woman’s body spasmed wildly for a moment before she was seized with some new emotion. Slowly, she turned her head and gazed over at a small sachet hanging from the bed curtain. There was a protective talisman inside. Once, when Company Commander Xu was returning from duty, he had stopped by a temple outside the town walls on his way home and obtained it for her. The woman’s lashes fluttered slightly; her eyes filled with tears. They washed away the menace in her eyes, making them appear incomparably tender. It was a pity such tenderness lasted for only the briefest of moments.

Like a lamp snuffed out, the light left her eyes, her tightly contracted pupils expanding in death. The richly attired woman’s breath came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the world’s most malicious curse. She collapsed heavily against the dressing table, wrapped in the last warmth of her rapidly cooling body.

*No one loves you. No one treats you with sincerity. By the end of your life, your heart will be filled with only hatred and suspicion. You will become a violent lover of bloodshed, and carnage will follow in your footsteps wherever you go. You are doomed to drag all of them to a miserable death.*

On that lifeless, sweltering late summer evening, Chang Geng stared dully at the sumptuously dressed body slumped against the dressing table and clutched at the bloodstained iron cuff in a daze.

Why did she kill herself?

Why did she hate him so much? And if she did, why did she raise him all this time?

And what was the story behind this iron cuff from the Black Iron Battalion?

Shen Shiliu…who exactly was he?

Xiu-niang’s curse seemed to have already taken effect. A child’s formative experiences of trust and intimacy come from their parents, who give all they have to raise them. Chang Geng, however, had never received such care. He had been forced into constant vigilance, heart full of misgivings and caution. No matter how magnanimous and considerate his

nature, such an existence was bound to transform him into a stray dog with its tail tucked between its legs. Even if he desperately yearned for human warmth, he would still reject it again and again out of fear.

He was at once seized by an intense notion—he had to find Shen Shiliu. He had to discover what kind of divine being this godfather of his was and what intentions he harbored.

Yet the moment he stepped out of Xiu-niang's blood-soaked boudoir, he found himself unexpectedly timid.

*Of course,* Chang Geng thought dazedly, *Shen-xiansheng's knowledge and abilities… How could he possibly be nothing but a destitute scholar who failed the imperial exams multiple times?*

Although Shiliu was an indolent layabout, he had the noble bearing of an aristocratic young master. He lived on others' charity, yet he never seemed remotely poverty-stricken… How could he possibly be some ordinary wastrel? These were all things Chang Geng should have realized long ago, but when he closed his eyes, all he could see was Shen Shiliu sitting by his sickbed, head propped up in his hand.

If that too had been a hypocritical show of false affection—

The moment the door opened, the old kitchen maid, who had been straining her neck trying to peer inside, stepped forward with an ingratiating smile. "Young master, today…"

Chang Geng glanced at her with bloodshot eyes.

The woman shuddered in fright and took a long moment to recover her wits. Clutching at her chest, she grumbled, "What's the matter with…"

Before she could finish, she saw the scene inside the room.

The maid froze, then stumbled back three steps and collapsed onto the ground. Tilting her head back, she let out a piercing, nearly inhuman shriek.

At almost the same time, the sharp sound of a siren filled the town.

Someone had set off the gate tower's siren flare. Wreathed in white smoke dyed by violet gold, the meter-long flare shot into the sky with a *whoosh.* A shrill wail rippled outwards some twenty kilometers, slicing

through the grim tranquility that had blanketed Yanhui Town for fourteen years.

Shen Yi had been in the middle of sorting out a suit of armor. At the sound of the siren flare, he lifted his head. In the very next moment, someone kicked the Shen family's front gate open from the outside. Shen Yi snatched up the heavy sword he had divested from the armor.

"It's me," Shiliu called in a low voice.

"The barbarians made their move early?" Shen Yi asked grimly.

The question was fleeting and muted, yet the half-deaf Shen Shiliu didn't miss a word. He responded with total composure, "There are barbarian spies aboard the giant kite. The men on the returning ship aren't our people."

Shiliu didn't linger as he spoke, striding swiftly into the bedroom. Standing beside the bed, he lifted his hand and, with one sharp knifehand strike, split the bed in two with a loud *crack*—unexpectedly, the base of the bed was hollow.

A dark suit of armor lay beneath the wooden boards.

Shiliu deftly pried open the hidden compartment on the armor's breastplate and fished out a black iron token of authority. His fingertips were pale in the eerie, frigid glare of the token. He pivoted back toward the doorway. That slouching back of his that always seemed as pliant as mud was now straight as an iron spear. A gust of wind drifted through the open doors, lifting his thin, dark robe before quickly brushing past him, as though terrified of the cold, murderous aura emanating from his body.

"Jiping," said Shiliu.

Jiping was Shen Yi's courtesy name. Shiliu never addressed him with it in the presence of outsiders. The two of them spent their days arguing about the most insignificant chores and seemed as close as actual brothers, but now, Shen Yi took a step back and dropped down easily onto one knee.

"Sir."

"Seeing as they've come earlier than expected, we may as well take advantage of the chaos and haul in the net. I'm leaving His Highness the Fourth Prince to you—get him out of the town first."

“Yes sir,” Shen Yi responded.

Then, like a flash of lightning, Shiliu picked up his outer robe and the sword beside the bed and turned to leave.

# Chapter 7:
# Enemy Attack

THE VETERAN OFFICER overseeing the town's defense today was surnamed Wang. He had wasted most of his life atop Yanhui Town's walls. In his spare time, he liked to drink, and when he was deep in his cups, he liked to gather a crowd and boast about how once upon a time, in the good old days, he followed old Marquis Gu on the Northern Expedition. No one knew how much of his story was true, but it wasn't entirely beyond the realm of possibility either. After all, the old marquis had been a human with basic human needs, so he must have brought along some people to cook and clean.

But no matter how negligent he was, Old Wang didn't dare touch a drop on the day of the giant kite's return. On this day, all the senior officers lined up in formation, and everyone feared making a spectacle of themselves by committing careless mistakes.

Unfortunately, the more one fears something, the more likely it is to occur.

Old Wang craned his neck, watching the siren flare rise slowly into the sky, and howled, "Which shitty little bastard forgot what day it is? Go cause trouble in your wife's bed if you're gonna get sozzled. What are you doing setting off the siren flare? You think it's a silly little toy you can set off like fireworks?"

At the mouth of the underground river there was a large pool of water that served to welcome the giant kite back to harbor, which was enclosed by an iron palisade. This barrier was already half-open when the siren flare went off, startling the soldiers. Bewildered, the soldiers didn't dare act recklessly and slid the iron bolt back into place. The palisade ended up stuck in an awkwardly half-open position, like a giant gaping maw that had been struck dumb, catching the dragon heads extending from the giant kite's prow with perfect precision.

There were already soldiers standing at the ready who were waiting to help unload the violet gold from the massive ship. At this, they all looked

back in confusion. The company commander in charge of supplies pulled a small copper squall from his lapels, aimed it at the soldiers responsible for opening the iron palisade, and bellowed, “What are you all standing around daydreaming for? The giant kite’s stuck—!”

Before he could finish, the deck of the giant kite exploded in a scorching blaze of light. An enormous stream of white fog erupted with a *whoosh* as an iron arrow thick as a man’s arm hurtled into the sky and, amid cries of alarm, punched through the wailing siren flare with unstoppable force.

The siren flare fell instantly quiet and, after hanging briefly in the air, plummeted back to earth. There was a fleeting moment of silence. Then, pandemonium erupted.

“A parhelion arrow!”

“What’s going on? Who activated the parhelion arrows? Have the people on the ship gone mad?”

“This is treason! What are they doing?”

The parhelion was a giant mechanical bow that measured ten meters wide when fully drawn. Only colossal machines like giant kites could accommodate its size. Obviously, such a terrifying weapon was impossible to operate with human strength alone. The base of the bow was equipped with a fuel tank filled with violet gold. When fully powered up, an arrow released from such a bow could pierce through a city wall a dozen meters thick.

It was said that when a giant kite glided toward the horizon, the shower of parhelion arrows in its wake was like divine retribution meted out by the gods. Even heavy armor couldn’t defend against them.

The whole thing happened too quickly. Old Wang snatched up a field scope and stretched his neck like an old tortoise as he mumbled, “What in the name of…! This is serious. Notify Magistrate Guo and Commandant Lü at once! Go!”

He was still giving orders when the darkened fire pinions on the giant kite lit up once again. The machinery had no time to warm up, and the roar of burning violet gold was punctuated by a series of explosions, so that the giant kite seemed like a massive beast waking from slumber. Old Wang

looked helplessly through the field scope as the deck of the giant kite flipped over and exposed a squadron of soldiers in heavy armor stepping menacingly into formation. The armor gleamed like the reflection of sunlight on a river. Even from a distance, a silent pressure emanated from their ranks.

The leader of the group pushed open his visor, revealing a heavily scarred face. Terror shuddered through Old Wang—this face was unfamiliar. How did a stranger manage to find his way onto the giant kite?

Scarface broke into a smile. Tilting his head back, he let out a long whistle so shrill it pierced through the rumbling of the machinery, like a wolf's howl. The heavy-armored warriors behind him mimicked his stance as howls rose and fell. They were like a pack of wolves starved for an entire winter baring their deadly, insatiable fangs.

Some nameless voice in the crowd burst out, "Barbarians!"

This was like a poke to a hornet's nest. The residents of a dozen neighboring villages, men and women, young and old, were all gathered in Yanhui Town today. In an instant, every one of them turned into panicking sheep. Seized by terror, they scattered in all directions, pushing, shoving, and trampling countless people as they fled. They even collided with the warhorses of the soldiers on duty, making the poor animals whinny incessantly in alarm.

Old Wang leaped onto the watchtower atop the town gate and drew the pike at his waist to stab open the gold tank at the top of the tower. He knew this tank contained a small quantity of violet gold, fuel for the everlasting altar lamps that burned day and night. If he was lucky and could ignite the violet gold, he could blast the roof of the watchtower into the sky as a makeshift siren flare.

Violet gold poured from the tank in torrents, choking the old veteran with its pungent smell as he pulled out a firestarter with trembling hands. As the sky filled with howls, those wizened hands shook the stick back and forth, producing a small handful of sparks, and shoved the whole thing into the gold tank.

Half of the violet gold inside the tank had already been spilt, but the rest ignited into a raging fire at the touch of flame. The watchtower's vent

was blocked, so only a few tiny streams of steam managed to choke their way out. Any second now, it was going to blow—

A parhelion arrow loosed with enough force to puncture the sun pierced Old Wang's chest, and his mortal body exploded into smithereens. Yet the arrow didn't slow at all, taking the remnants of the old veteran's body with it as it punched into the side of the watchtower. There was a loud rumble as the tower collapsed from its height. Shattered rock hurtled down as soldiers and civilians fled the site. At the same moment, the burning gold tank at the top of the tower finally shot into the sky with a shrill scream. An inauspicious flash of violet light followed by a giant explosion lit up half of Yanhui Town like a burst of fireworks.

It was only then that the messenger standing by the copper squall came to his senses. He raised his voice and bellowed, "ENEMY ATTACK! THE BARBARIANS ARE ATTACKING—"

The captured giant kite slowly rose into the sky as a deadly shower of parhelion arrows rained down on the earth. The civilians fled for their lives like a swarm of headless flies as thirty-six light-armored cavalrymen rushed out over the half-open limestone slabs covering the river. All the cannons lining the town walls raised their barrels in unison, taking aim at the giant kite drifting overhead.

Fire and smoke soon filled the town.

The cargo bay of the giant kite opened, and countless northern barbarian soldiers descended from the sky, howling as they plummeted. The wolves howled with rage, the streets filled with blood—chaos reigned.

The scar-faced man leaped from the giant kite. Steam erupted from the soles of his armored feet, propelling him ten meters into the air before he landed on a cavalryman's warhorse. There was no way the warhorse could bear the full weight of heavy armor. With a whinny of panic, its front legs snapped at the knee. Its rider had no time to react; the barbarian warrior seized him by the neck and bit down viciously on his throat.

Blood spurted out like splashes of oil as the warrior tore a chunk of flesh out of the rider's neck with his bare teeth. The man didn't even have time to scream before he passed into the west. Scarface let out a booming laugh before swallowing that chunk of human flesh in two quick bites like a carrion-eating demon. Then he pursed his lips and whistled. A handful of

barbarians in heavy armor appeared. They followed close at his side as he swept past the bloody carnage of the streets and rode straight for Company Commander Xu's residence.

Two classes of armor were used in the military. Light armor was worn by the cavalry and could only support a small amount of propulsion. It relied primarily on man and animal power, and its advantages lay in how light and convenient it was. Heavy armor was a completely different beast. A suit of heavy armor was roughly the height of two grown men and equipped with a gold tank on its back. With violet gold flowing through its joints, the armor could traverse a thousand kilometers in seconds and lift a broadsword weighing hundreds of kilograms. It could even be armed with a miniature cannon at the waist. In short, a single suit of heavy armor had the power to annihilate a thousand soldiers.

A fully equipped heavy armor infantry would preclude the need for a cavalry, infantry, or navy—but the cost of heavy armor was much too high. Operating a suit of heavy armor for six to ten hours would burn through a full tank of violet gold, an amount that could keep altar lamps on the watchtowers lit for two years. Violet gold was the lifeline of the nation. On the black market, it would be difficult to purchase so much as fifty grams of highly adulterated violet gold for the same weight in gold coin.

Even in such a powerful nation, there was only one military division that could support a fully equipped contingent of heavy-armored infantry: the Black Carapace Division of the Black Iron Battalion commanded by the Marquis of Anding, Gu Yun.

So where exactly did these barbarian soldiers acquire so many suits of heavy armor?

Stumbling out of the Xu family residence, the old kitchen maid ran right into this cluster of fell stars. She didn't have time to utter a single sound before she was smashed into a side wall and reduced to a bloody paste. The scar-faced barbarian marched straight into the inner courtyard unchallenged, bellowing, "Huge'er! Huge'er!"

Of course, "Huge'er"—Xiu-niang—could no longer answer his call.

The elaborately carved wooden door let out a miserable shriek and split in two as it was kicked in by a heavy-armored knight with a loud *bang*.

The barbarians' implacable footsteps halted at last as they froze in stunned silence before the door of the lady's boudoir.

The faint scent of incense had yet to disperse. The room was still sparsely lit, and the tassels hanging from the bed curtains cast long, scattered shadows on the ground. Someone had tidied up the dressing table, leaving only an open box of rouge in the corner.

A young boy knelt before the bed with his back toward them. And, indistinct in the darkness…there seemed to be a person lying on the bed.

The boy—Chang Geng—instinctively glanced back at the loud crash. Strangely, he wasn't at all surprised to see a group of scary-looking barbarian warriors break into his home in broad daylight. Realization dawned on him as to why Xiu-niang had killed herself. The fact that these barbarians could enter the town must have something to do with her.

Company Commander Xu had been aboard the giant kite. In all likelihood, he had already been executed by the barbarians thanks to her treasonous actions. This woman had succeeded in enacting her revenge for the wrongs committed against her nation and family, yet she'd also caused the death of the only man in the world to treat her with kindness.

Chang Geng's young heart was filled to the brim with thoughts of the futility of life. He shot an apathetic glance at the barbarians before turning back and kowtowing to the woman lying on the bed. This he considered repayment for the many years of faltering benevolence she had shown him by allowing him to live. With this last obeisance complete, he severed all connections with the dead woman.

Chang Geng rose to his feet and turned to face the heavy-armored warriors standing by the door.

The suits of heavy armor were as immovable as mountains. Standing before them with his young, mortal body, he was like an ant attempting to shake a great tree. By all rights, he should have been terrified, but he wasn't scared at all. It wasn't that Chang Geng thought he could repel so many enormous barbarian warriors by himself. He knew very well that his chances of escaping this calamity were slim. Yet for some odd reason, he was not afraid.

Perhaps it was because every bit of fear in his heart had been wrung out upon learning that “Shen Shiliu” had a secret identity and ulterior motives.

The scar-faced warrior stared at Chang Geng until a thought seemed to occur to him. His expression turned sinister. “Where is Huge’er?”

Chang Geng’s eyes lingered on his face for a moment. “I remember you,” he said. “Two winters ago, you were the one who led those wolves that attacked me in the snow.”

One of the other northern barbarian soldiers clad in heavy armor stepped forward to grab the boy, but the scar-faced man lifted a hand, stopping him.

Scarface lowered his head and bent down somewhat clumsily to stare at the youth whose head barely reached the chest of his suit of armor. In oddly accented Chinese, he said once again, “I’m asking you—Huge’er. Xiu…Xiu-niang. Where is she?”

“She’s dead,” said Chang Geng.

Clutching the iron cuff on his wrist, he stepped to the side and revealed the silent corpse lying on the bed. The corner of Xiu-niang’s mouth was still stained with a streak of black blood, creating stark contrast with her snow-white complexion. She looked like the wilted remains of a poisonous flower.

The barbarians standing in the courtyard let out a howl of sorrow and fell to their knees in a flurry of movement.

Scarface appeared temporarily lost. He stepped slowly into Xiu-niang’s room. Although his movements were careful, the floor splintered with fine cracks at each step of his heavy-armor-clad feet. The warrior walked over to the bed and reached out as though to brace himself against the large, ornately carved frame, but shrank back before he could follow through, as if scared of breaking the bedpost.

As he bent down in his heavy armor, white steam drifted out behind him, dispersing throughout the tiny bedroom like mist. The violet gold stored inside his suit burned with a soft gasping noise that made him sound like an animal on the verge of death.

That animal lightly touched the woman’s face.

And felt only a desolate chill.

The scar-faced warrior let out a keening cry, like a wolf that had lost its beloved mate. Then the heavy armor standing before the bed whipped around at a speed incomprehensible to the naked eye. White steam billowed wildly outwards as a large, mechanical hand reached out and caught Chang Geng in its grasp.

Chang Geng felt his feet leave the ground. A sharp pain lanced through his back as the barbarian warrior picked him up and slammed him viciously against the wall, his blood and bones juddering at the impact.

The collision split a crack through the wall. Chang Geng couldn’t hold back a mouthful of blood and spat it all over the scar-faced warrior’s iron-encased arm.

Lowering his head with difficulty, Chang Geng met those murderous eyes. He had never seen eyes so heavily suffused with rust before. But somehow, despite the huge disparity in strength, he unexpectedly found the will to fight. Chang Geng stared fiercely at the barbarian warrior before him, gaze unflinching.

# Chapter 8:
# Life History

THE YOUTH AND THE KILLER'S EYES met in inevitable confrontation. Though the wolf pup's fangs and claws had yet to fully sharpen, his viciousness was innate.

Perhaps this was his natural disposition. When faced with life-threatening situations, there are two types of humans who fight back. The first are those who, after careful deliberation—perhaps due to a sense of morality, responsibility, or personal integrity, or perhaps after weighing the advantages and disadvantages—feel that they have no choice but to fight. Although these people are afraid, their conscience or rationality allows them to vanquish their fears in a show of true bravery.

The second type are those who don't think about anything at all. All their actions stem from instinct. They instinctively grow angry and are instinctively filled with fighting spirit. Even if they're vaguely aware that their resistance may lead to worse outcomes, they can't resist the urge to tear off a piece of their enemy's flesh.

Right now, Chang Geng was undoubtedly the latter.

As if stung by Chang Geng's gaze, the scar-faced warrior furiously raised his huge fist, intending to dash his brains out on the spot.

At that moment, there came an angry shout from outside. The body of the barbarian standing guard by the door went flying, demolishing half the room. The dimly lit boudoir brightened as sunlight poured in. Chang Geng narrowed his eyes, but before he could make sense of the cold gleam of light before him, he heard a blood-curdling scream. The arm with which the scar-faced barbarian warrior had been holding Chang Geng aloft was completely and ruthlessly severed. Feet kicking in empty air, Chang Geng fell helplessly to the side, only to be gently caught by the metal arms of a different suit of heavy armor.

Shen-xiansheng's courtyard was always littered with disassembled suits of light armor. Heavy armor, on the other hand, was extremely

expensive and never handed off to civilian artificers for maintenance. Not even an artificer with connections to Company Commander Xu was trusted with them. There had only been one exception—a suit of heavy armor so utterly broken down and dilapidated that it was consigned to General's Slope. Using his connections, Shen-xiansheng had privately asked to keep it and, after bringing it home, had enthusiastically taken that ancient suit of broken armor apart piece by piece and given Chang Geng a thorough rundown of all its components.

Chang Geng remembered him saying that donning a suit of heavy armor was akin to carrying a hundred thousand kilograms of extra weight. It was easy to crush several horses or demolish several layers of fortifications. With a little knowledge of the fundamentals, even a child could do it. The greatest difficulty in operating a suit of heavy armor lay not in performing feats of extreme strength. On the contrary, the most skilled armored warriors were those who could thread the finest of needles while wearing the heaviest of armor.

The newcomer's armor was different from the suits worn by the barbarian warriors. It seemed more slightly built, and its surface didn't gleam cold silver either. Rather, it was pitch-black and seemed somewhat unremarkable. The newcomer patted Chang Geng lightly on the back, then set the youth on one shoulder and said in a low voice, "Don't be scared."

The voice coming through the armor was distorted, but Chang Geng's ears were keen. He turned to stare pensively at that iron mask, which hid its wearer from sight.

The barbarians standing by the door appeared to have recovered their senses. They rushed wildly forth like a swarm of bees and, with Scarface at the center of their formation, fanned out into a circle surrounding the black-armored warrior and Chang Geng. The black-armored warrior raised one hand to protect the spot where Chang Geng was sitting on his shoulder and lifted a smoothly polished staff with the other. Thin wisps of steam trailed from one end of that unimpressive-looking iron rod.

The black-armored warrior had chopped off Scarface's arm too quickly for Chang Geng to see clearly. Now, a tendril of doubt wound through his mind as he wondered, *Is that dinky iron rod his only weapon?*

The scarred warrior’s face was drenched in cold sweat, and his complexion had turned ashen. Taking two cautious steps back, he said in a guttural voice, “Black Carapace armor and a windslasher… You’re one of those demon crows.”

Chang Geng sat stunned for a moment, then his spine stiffened—*demon crows*!

Now he recalled. Fourteen years ago, during the Northern Expedition, the Black Iron Battalion tore deep into the heart of the vast grasslands of the north like a black cyclone. Members of the barbarian tribes regarded them with both fear and hatred, referring to them as “demon crows.”

The black-armored warrior ignored him and instructed Chang Geng dispassionately, “Hold on tight.”

Scarface let out a battle cry and, following his lead, the four barbarian warriors rushed forward in practiced formation. As swords and spears came swinging in all directions, a flash of dark purple light sparked beneath the black-armored warrior’s feet, allowing him to weave seamlessly between the glint of enemy blades. With a leap, the black-armored warrior landed on the Xu residence’s crumbling rooftop. His left shoulder—the one supporting Chang Geng—barely shifted beneath the boy, but the moment he found his footing, the warrior spun his right arm with such disorienting speed that the iron staff in his hand became a hazy afterimage.

Chang Geng opened his eyes wide and saw a ring of phantom-like blades emerge from one end of the black-armored warrior’s staff and sweep downward like a tornado touching down. The armored barbarian soldier in closest pursuit had no time to dodge and took the strike squarely in the chest. The gold tank set over his heart ruptured, and the violet gold contained within ignited in a terrifying blaze. The metal behemoth exploded in an instant, leaving behind a bloody, dismembered mess.

Searing droplets of blood splashed onto Chang Geng’s face. Harnessing all his self-control, he barely maintained his composure, hands tightly clutching the edge of the black-armored warrior’s shoulder.

This was the invincible Black Iron Battalion of legend, which could fight its enemies a hundred to one.

Recognizing the disparity in strength, the remaining barbarians didn’t dare engage in single combat against this enemy. After exchanging a look, they charged out of Xiu-niang’s room and leaped onto the roof from all directions. One lunged at the black-armored warrior from below, hacking at the joints of his legs, while another swung a sword at his head to prevent him from escaping upward. A third dived at the black-armored warrior from the rear and stabbed at the gold tank at his waist.

After losing his arm, Scarface had retreated some dozen steps away. He lifted his remaining arm, and one end of his vambrace cracked open to reveal the sinister tip of an arrow, loaded and ready to fire. He leveled the weapon at Chang Geng, who was still perched on the black-armored warrior’s shoulder.

These barbarians had grown up hunting together. They knew how to chase down, encircle, and dispatch their prey, and their cooperation was practically flawless.

The misty white air filled with hair-raising killing intent.

Chang Geng had finally figured out the mechanism behind the black-armored warrior’s staff. When the staff was spun quickly, several black iron blades measuring roughly thirty centimeters would extend from one end of the weapon with fine bursts of steam. When the weapon was withdrawn, the sharp blades would quickly slot back into hidden incisions on the side of the staff, disappearing from view. The blades swung in a circle with each extension and retraction, like a terrifying meat grinder.

Without warning, Chang Geng’s feet kicked through air as the black-armored warrior transferred the youth’s weight from his shoulder to the crook of his elbow. He pressed Chang Geng tightly against the chest plate of his heavy armor before unexpectedly arching backwards. Chang Geng was scared witless. Setting aside his own weight, this suit of heavy armor alone must weigh several hundred kilograms. Bending back like this would put all that weight on the black-armored warrior’s waist—wouldn’t his spine snap under the burden?

But the black-armored warrior continued, performing a neat backflip in midair. Then, with Chang Geng still in his arms, he leaped down from the roof, evading the arrow shot by the scar-faced man by the slimmest margin. The gleam of the windslasher’s blades condensed into an elongated slash,

cutting down one barbarian while relieving another of his legs, as simple and swift as a falcon swooping down on a rabbit. Steam erupted from the black-armored warrior's greaves, propelling the heavy armor several dozen meters away in the blink of an eye.

It would have been child's play to dispatch the rest of the enemy soldiers. But since Chang Geng was present, he engaged them no further.

"I'll escort you out of town first," the black-armored warrior said. "It's too dangerous here. As for your mother…my condolences."

Chang Geng leaned against the black-armored warrior in silence. "My mother killed herself with poison," he said after a moment. "She's been in contact with the barbarians the entire time. She was probably a spy for them."

The black-armored warrior said nothing. It seemed such a revelation was not surprising to him.

"You've rescued the son of a barbarian spy. How unlucky of you," Chang Geng paused briefly again before tearing through the other's mask, "Shen-xiansheng."

Fine streams of white steam poured from the sides of the black-armored warrior's face. The black iron visor flipped up, revealing Shen Yi's gentle and scholarly mien.

"There was a mutiny on the giant kite during the northern patrol," Shen Yi said. "I'd thought perhaps Xu-xiong[13] was the traitor, but now, it appears Xiu-niang committed suicide out of guilt toward her husband. Xu-xiong has likely already died for the country, ignorant of the truth. As for you…I'm very sorry for your loss."

"So you knew all along…" Chang Geng muttered. "Who are you?"

"This humble official is an officer of the Black Iron Battalion and a subordinate under Marshal Gu," said Shen Yi.

An officer of the Black Iron Battalion and a subordinate of the Marquis of Anding, Gu Yun.

As Chang Geng digested these words, he found it all very peculiar. He had only just learned that, in addition to having no blood ties to his reclusive mother, she was also a barbarian spy. Now, it turned out that the

pedantic, poverty-stricken scholar next-door, whose hands were permanently stained by machine oil, was a general of the Black Iron Battalion.

Then what about Shiliu?

Chang Geng thought with a humorless smile that even if someone were to tell him now that his godfather was actually Marshal Gu himself, he would no longer have the energy to be surprised.

“Why is a direct subordinate of Marshal Gu living secluded in a backwater town? Why did you save me, the son of a barbarian tribeswoman?” The moment these two questions left Chang Geng’s mouth, he knew he was on the verge of losing it. He willed himself to shut up, but he couldn’t prevent one last superfluous question from squeezing its way between his teeth. “What about Shen Shiliu?”

Having asked that final question, Chang Geng was overcome by an indescribable wave of sadness. After everything that had happened, he still couldn’t help but think of Shen Shiliu. He knew perfectly well that this person was doubtless some mysterious individual of great renown who had come to do an undercover inspection tour of the countryside. Yet Chang Geng still worried about his poor vision and weak hearing, and wondered whether he might accidentally become the casualty of a clash of swords, or if he would find a place to hide…

Even worse, he couldn’t help but wonder: *Why was Shen-xiansheng the one who came to find me? Why didn’t Shiliu come instead?*

The heavens shuddered with the cries of battle as the giant kite shrouded Yanhui Town in its shadow. Parhelion arrows fell now and again like lingering ghosts. In the distance, a house caught fire, the conflagration spreading quickly through the town. Shen Yi turned a blind eye to the chaos around him, maintaining an expression of cold indifference as he wove through the rain of arrows like a bird in flight, or a fish in water. “Your Highness, please hold on tight.”

“What did you just call me?” Chang Geng asked numbly.

Calm and unhurried, Shen Yi explained, “Fourteen years ago, His Majesty the Emperor embarked on a southern tour. At the time, the noble consort was pregnant and stayed behind in one of the temporary imperial

residences. A wicked assassin made an attempt on her life, but thankfully, with the help of her loyal servants and her sister, she managed to escape. However, as they fled south, they unexpectedly encountered a group of violent insurrectionists. The noble consort was in poor health. Amid the turmoil and confusion, she risked her life to give birth to Your Highness, but was ultimately unable to reunite with His Majesty.

"The noble consort's younger sister fled with Your Highness in her care, and we lost contact with you. Over the years, His Majesty has sent numerous envoys on private investigations, always believing Your Highness was killed in the aftermath of that tragedy. That is, until three years ago, when clues finally surfaced. Thus, he sent us here to meet you," Shen Yi explained concisely. "Please forgive me, Your Highness, for not being able to divulge my true identity all this time."

Torn between laughter and tears, Chang Geng thought perhaps Shen-xiansheng's brain was filled with engine oil. This wild tale he had woven was so full of holes it was practically falling apart at the seams. In that case, according to his story, Xiu-niang was the younger sister of the noble consort? Could it be that the noble consort was also a barbarian? Also, would the emperor really only send two people to find his long-lost son? And even if the emperor was indeed so impoverished that, out of the countless civil and military officials of the imperial court, he could only afford to dispatch two, why would these people remain undercover for over two years?

A general of the legendary Black Iron Battalion had been living right next door! How could he have been unaware of Xiu-niang's secret correspondence with the barbarians? Why did he not stop her?

How absurd.

Brushing away the doubts clouding his heart, Chang Geng interrupted Shen Yi. "You've got the wrong person."

"Your Highness…" said Shen Yi.

"You've got the wrong person!" Chang Geng was utterly exhausted. He had no more patience for these people who only spewed lies. "Put me down. I'm the bastard son begotten from that barbarian woman lying with some unknown mountain bandit. I'm hardly worthy of being rescued by a

general of the Black Iron Battalion, nor am I worthy of calling someone of such lofty status my godfather.”

Hearing his final words, Shen Yi sighed, feeling that most of Chang Geng’s ire was directed toward Shiliu. Implicated by association, he had become a convenient target for the youth’s anger. Shen Yi gently took hold of one of Chang Geng’s flailing feet and said, “Please forgive my impropriety. Your Highness’s right pinky toe is somewhat more bent than most ordinary folk. It is identical to His Majesty’s, and a marker of all imperial descendants. There is no mistake.”

Chang Geng swiftly retracted his foot as his heart turned even colder.

He remembered this incident. His toe hadn’t been curved from birth at all. Rather, it had been personally smashed by Xiu-niang. Ignoring his sobbing cries, she had viciously broken his toe before wrapping it with a foot-binding technique used by women, forcing his bones into a deformed arch.

A descendant of dragons and phoenixes? What bullshit. To think that even this could be forged.

# Chapter 9:
# Killing Intent

AT THAT INSTANT, a familiar wail burrowed its way into Chang Geng's ear. Turning back, he saw Butcher Ge's decapitated head hanging from a banister alongside the head of a pig. The corpulent body of his wife lay underneath, her skin pallid—she had been crushed by a section of collapsed wall and already breathed her last. The intermittent sobbing of their chubby little son could be heard coming from a short distance away.

Aghast, Chang Geng blurted out without thinking, "Isn't that Ge Pangxiao from the butcher's family…?"

Shen Yi didn't even pause as he sped by. Thinking he hadn't heard him, Chang Geng cried, "General, wait!"

"My orders are to protect and escort Your Highness out of town. We can't afford to tarry," Shen Yi said. From behind the metal visor, his voice was like iron covered in icy frost on the coldest day of winter.

Chang Geng was stunned.

The howling wind blew past his ears as beads of cold sweat slid belatedly down his spine. When he reached out, all he could feel was the chill of the black iron armor. It was so cold, just like his iron cuff that never seemed to warm no matter how long it stayed pressed against his flesh.

Ge Pangxiao had a natural ability to endear himself to people. When he smiled, he was all crinkled eyes and exposed teeth. A clever little scamp, there was no one who disliked him.

Chang Geng asked quietly, "General, isn't he your student?"

He didn't hear Shen Yi's response. Perhaps, Chang Geng thought, in the eyes of this General Shen, the students who spent every day of the past two years at his side were nothing more than part of the role he played while carrying out the orders of the emperor. Indeed—what did an insignificant place like Yanhui Town matter to an officer of the glorious Black Iron Battalion? What did the son of a butcher matter?

In this world, perhaps there were some lives that were more valuable than others. Even if someone was likable, it didn't mean their life had worth.

Of course Shen Yi's blood wasn't as frigid as his armor. But he had few options in these tumultuous circumstances. He had to protect this precious little prince all by himself, so he naturally had to prioritize Chang Geng's safety—he couldn't afford any unexpected mishaps. Furthermore, the Western Regions had only recently pledged allegiance to Great Liang, so the Black Iron Battalion's elite troops were still stationed there. They had brought no more than a small group of soldiers to contend with the power-hungry barbarians and had spent two years laying this trap. In order to defeat the enemy despite their inferior numbers, it was imperative to strike a killing blow.

Reeling in a big fish like these barbarian conspirators would buy them several years of peace on the northern border. Fail here, and all their previous effort would be wasted. The reasons were too complex to explain in a few words—how could Shen Yi possibly convey them to a half-grown child in so little time?

With some difficulty, Shen Yi said, "Your Highness, please forgive m —Your Highness!"

Chang Geng bent down and grabbed the black-iron latch affixed to Shen Yi's armored elbow, catching him off guard. Obviously, a suit of heavy armor issued by the Black Iron Battalion couldn't be so easily pried apart—but his interference forced Shen Yi to loosen the grip of his iron gauntlets by a few centimeters.

Shen Yi had no choice but to yield. Chang Geng had never encountered a real black-iron suit of heavy armor until today. The difference between the precision instrument that was a black-iron heavy armor and those broken-down heaps of junk used to guard Yanhui Town was lost on him. He had no idea that if a Black Carapace encountered blunt-force damage, a spring-like mechanism would launch a projectile with enough power to snap a tree trunk thicker than a man's spread arms…never mind the mortal body of a young boy.

Seizing his chance, Chang Geng nimbly pulled his feet free and flipped down from Shen Yi's shoulder.

“I am not some Highness.” Chang Geng regarded him from two steps away, his expression darker than the black iron itself. “And my feet aren’t dragon claws or anything like that, either. It’s a deformity caused by my mother binding my feet with broken crockery. If what you say is true, and she really did have some connection with the imperial family, then perhaps she meant to create a fraudulent prince to muddle the imperial lineage. You seem to be in a great rush, sir. I’m sure you have far more important responsibilities to attend to. I’m not afraid of dying, nor do I have any intention of stealing the identity of some blue-blooded imperial kinsman. If that’s clear, I won’t keep you any longer.”

Shen Yi flipped his black-iron visor up and stared at the youth in shock. Chang Geng, however, didn’t spare him another glance as he jumped down from the top of the wall and ran toward Ge Pangxiao’s cries for help.

In a small place like Yanhui Town, such a suit of black-iron heavy armor was extremely conspicuous. While Shen Yi stood briefly bewildered, he caught the attention of a group of barbarian soldiers, who wasted no time engaging him in combat. Chang Geng wasn’t all that concerned. Even if he was merely an amateur when it came to fighting, he could tell those barbarians didn’t stand a chance against this martial expert from the Black Iron Battalion. The folk legends claiming that it had only taken a few dozen Black Carapaces to conquer the grasslands all those years ago may have been exaggerated, but it was clear they weren’t just wind from an empty cave.

Chang Geng’s many years of martial training weren’t totally useless. He dashed though the narrow streets on agile feet and vaulted over a courtyard wall just in time to see a barbarian soldier stove in a veteran guard’s chest with a single strike. The old soldier uttered no sound as he collapsed to the ground with a thud—the blow was almost certainly fatal. Ge Pangxiao clutched at his head and shrank into a corner of the courtyard in terror, his face so swollen he looked like a steamed bun.

The old soldier’s fallen sword lay several meters away. When the barbarian’s back was turned, Chang Geng seized his chance and lunged forward, scooping up the heavy blade. The tip of the sword released a thin jet of steam. It was a rotary sword, though clearly old and in a terrible state of disrepair. Whether it was still usable was anyone’s guess.

Hearing movement behind him, the barbarian lurched clumsily around in his heavy armor. Ge Pangxiao opened his mouth wide—

Chang Geng twisted open the steam valve on the pommel of the rotary sword, and the sharp blade began to revolve with a groan. A burnt smell filled the air. How many parts inside this weapon were broken? It jolted so hard Chang Geng nearly lost his grip. Letting out a great shout, Chang Geng swung it at the giant tree beside him.

The whirring rotary sword looked like a piece of useless scrap metal, but it was excellent at chopping down trees. The barbarian soldier had no time to react; the tree toppled with a resounding crash and landed precisely on top of him. Chang Geng bellowed at Ge Pangxiao, “Quick! Run!”

Ge Pangxiao’s face was blurred with tears and snot. Raising his voice, he cried out, “Dage!”

Before he could say another word, the barbarian pinned beneath the giant tree let out an explosive roar and hacked the offending obstacle in half, tossing it aside like it was nothing. He was like an enraged water buffalo as he glowered with crimson eyes at the two practically defenseless boys.

Seeing that the only way out was to fight, Chang Geng prepared to meet the enemy head-on. He sucked in a deep breath and turned slightly, standing with his shoulders at a slant and assuming a stable ready position. Both hands tightened on his sword.

Regrettably, it didn’t matter how stable Chang Geng’s stance was. The moment he steadied his feet, he heard a *clunk*—the rotary sword had jammed. After a few additional sputtering noises, it discharged a plume of black smoke, thus becoming a bona fide piece of useless scrap metal.

Ge Pangxiao gasped in horror, “Th-th-this is…”

“Get out of the way,” said Chang Geng quietly.

Living up to his reputation for quick wits, Ge Pangxiao curled himself into a harmless meatball and rolled back into his corner without delay, clearing the area.

The barbarian soldier snarled furiously, fully intending to smash this insolent little brat into paste. The instant those pot-sized iron fists brushed

the top of his head, Chang Geng ducked down, swiftly slipping through the cracks in his opponent's attack. As he swept past the body of the old veteran, he leaned down and, with a quick *snap*, deftly removed the soldier's armored greaves.

He heard a gust of wind behind him. Clutching the greaves to his chest, Chang Geng somersaulted out of the way and dove through a small hole in the wall typically reserved for the neighbor's dog. He kicked his legs out the moment he landed, throwing caution to the wind as he fit the set of armored greaves to his own legs.

With a thunderous boom, the flimsy earthen walls of the commoners' home disintegrated from a single swing of the barbarian warrior's fists, showering the courtyard with bits of dirt. At this critical moment, Chang Geng activated the greaves. The residual violet gold in the steel leg guards expelled fine bursts of steam, propelling him ten meters away in an instant.

For a long second, Chang Geng felt like he was floating on air.

Aside from the iron cuff, this was his first time wearing a piece of steel armor. Straddling the line between life and death, he grabbed at the broken edge of the shattered courtyard wall and narrowly managed to keep his balance.

"Look out—!" Ge Pangxiao yelped.

The barbarian soldier swept aside the flying bricks with brute force, armor creaking with the strain as the steam gushing from beneath his feet pushed him aloft like an immortal rising through misty clouds. This child was more difficult to dispatch than expected. He lowered his iron fists, and the gears in his breastplate began to turn with a painful grating noise. His armor opened to reveal the pitch-black mouth of a cannon, which he leveled at Chang Geng.

Chang Geng hadn't yet figured out how to coexist peacefully with these wind fire wheels[14] strapped to his legs when he heard a whirring noise. He instinctively threw himself forward as a scorching heat seared across his back. Flying gravel pelted down on him like a hurricane of steel nails. It was all he could do to cover his head with his battered sword.

The people of the Central Plains would never strap a miniature cannon to the breastplate of their armor—the powerful recoil from firing

such a weapon was enough to shatter bone. Only the barbarians, with their more naturally robust physique, dared to fight in this manner. Some said the Black Iron Battalion's success in decimating the Eighteen Barbarian Tribes all those years ago was only due to their unfair advantage—after all, the nomadic barbarians were unable to fabricate their own armor. Now, on top of the violet gold that flowed beneath thousands of kilometers of their grasslands, they had somehow obtained the armor they lacked. How could they possibly resign themselves to subjugation by the sheeplike people of the Central Plains?

Right now, however, the young Chang Geng had no time to consider such a terrifying prospect.

Back when Shen-xiansheng—General Shen—taught him how to maintain a suit of armor, he had once mentioned that there was a limited amount of space in the armor to equip a miniature cannon. As a consequence, the cooling cylinders that prevented the cannon from overheating were not particularly effective. To prevent the user from being burned alive, there was a cooling-off period of roughly the amount of time it took to burn a stick of incense. The mouth of the miniature cannon locked automatically during this interval. Since the cannon had just fired, Chang Geng had a bit of room to breathe.

The barbarian soldier bellowed in stilted Chinese, "Run, little insect! Scare to death! Run!"

Chang Geng's eyes darkened with focus. He performed a smooth turn at the foot of the wall, his movements flowing like water, and lunged back towards the pursuing barbarian. Not expecting the boy to act so recklessly, the warrior was taken by surprise and instinctively tried to hack at him with his sword. The barbarian soldier's heavy armor was nearly two times the height of the youth, so its lower half formed a natural blind spot. Chang Geng bent backwards, sticking close to the ground, and ducked under the swing of the barbarian's blade. His steel greaves threw sparks as they scraped fiercely against the stone slabs underfoot.

Chang Geng hurled the useless steel sword at the barbarian soldier, striking him squarely in the back. The warrior instinctively attempted to dodge—but at that very moment, Chang Geng pressed a hand to his iron cuff. A spinning silk dart shot out like the flick of a snake's tongue and

pierced the barbarian's heavy armor as easily as a knife cutting through a melon.

The silk dart punctured the heavy armor's golden meridian, causing the meticulously constructed armor to immediately freeze in place. To prevent the suit from exploding and killing its wearer due to violet gold leakage, the heavy armor initiated its self-preservation protocol and promptly locked down all its joints from the arms to the lower back.

Chang Geng was just as surprised. He had only been trying his luck and hadn't expected the iron cuff that Shen Shiliu gave him as a toy to be such an incredible weapon.

At a time like this, if the wearer of the heavy armor had their wits about them, they ought to immediately remove their armor while they could, then get back to killing their enemy. After all, even without heavy armor, how could such a powerfully built warrior possibly lose to two half-grown children? But although the barbarian tribes managed to get their hands on some armor, it was obvious that they had yet to master these iron monsters. The moment his heavy armor stopped moving, the barbarian soldier was stupefied and tried to break open the locking mechanism with brute force.

No matter how blessed the physique, how could the body of a mere mortal defy the power of a suit of heavy armor? The struggling barbarian lost his balance, collapsing in a heap. Making a split-second decision, Chang Geng stepped forward without hesitation and set his steel greaves to maximum power. He took careful aim and stomped down viciously on the gold tank next to the miniature cannon at the back of the warrior's armor.

Even the most dilapidated leg armor could smash a six-centimeter-thick slab of stone to pieces. The gold tank burst open with a *crack*. At the same time, Chang Geng's leg went numb. He had stomped with too much power, and the recoil on his own leg hurt so badly he wondered whether he'd broken any bones. Gritting his teeth, the youth turned and retreated on his remaining good leg with a flip.

And not a moment too soon—the barbarian soldier's ruptured gold tank exploded, splattering the pulverized remnants of the barbarian tribesman's head everywhere. Chang Geng was unable to avoid the spray completely and ended up partially covered in bits of red and white brain

matter. Favoring one leg, he expressionlessly wiped his face clean of blood. Despite standing in the middle of such terrifying carnage, he wasn't scared at all.

Perhaps Xiu-niang had been right to call him a freak of nature.

Incredibly, Ge Pangxiao managed to pull through at the most crucial moment. He was shaking like a leaf, but his brain was still working. "Dage," he called out to Chang Geng, "let's hurry and find someplace to hide. I'll take you to my dad's cellar!"

Chang Geng took only a single step forward before the excruciating pain in his leg made him collapse with a muffled groan. Cold sweat ran down his body in rivulets. Ge Pangxiao sprinted over right away, heaving Chang Geng onto his back with a yell. Although he was still a child, he was already impressively plump. When he ran, the shiny, white fat on his body quivered like a giggling maiden, a counterpoint to Ge Pangxiao's own panting breaths.

But even as he gasped for air, he solemnly declared his loyalty. "Dage, they murdered my parents. You saved my life, so from now on, I'll follow you! I'll do whatever you tell me to! Let's kill all these barbarian bastards!"

As he finished speaking his voice broke, collapsing into a sob.

Chang Geng could no longer grip that useless sword with his weary hands. He allowed it to fall to the ground with a muffled thud. The muscles in his arm spasmed as he mustered a wretched smile and joked to Ge Pangxiao, "What would I want you around for? Can I eat you if there's a famine?"

"At the very least, I can help you wash your feet…" Ge Pangxiao responded.

Chang Geng's ears twitched. He heard an ominous rustling noise and hissed at Ge Pangxiao, "Shhh!"

Ge Pangxiao rambled on, "My mom always said that the feet I washed were the cleanest. Every time I washed my dad's feet, they'd look whiter than steamed buns…"

The little porker’s rambling ground to a halt; he took two shaky steps back. At the end of the alleyway, a barbarian warrior wearing a dazzling suit of heavy armor was slowly making his way toward them.

# Chapter 10:
# Gu Yun

SOMETHING INSIDE Chang Geng's mouth was bleeding. He tasted the sickly-sweet tang of blood at the slightest purse of his lips.

Demonstrating a surprising awareness of the severity of their situation, Ge Pangxiao clutched tight to Chang Geng's sleeve. His hands were clammy with cold sweat, but despite his extreme fastidiousness, Chang Geng was too preoccupied to shake him off just then. The two boys were like a pair of cubs cornered in a blind alley, struggling to bare their immature fangs.

The figure at the end of the alleyway raised his hand and pushed his visor up, revealing the handsome face of a man in his late thirties. His cheeks were thin, and the shadows lurking within his deep-set eyes seemed to reflect the vast Central Plains. His gaze as he looked down at Chang Geng from above was complicated. Longing lay therein, as well as a touch of pride, and this briefly gave him the appearance of someone brimming with human compassion.

But that thin sliver of compassion was ultimately swallowed whole by the deep hatred in those eyes. Like a red thread buried in the boundless snow beyond the pass, it vanished in an instant.

The loud rumble of armored steel rose and fell as soldiers in the same blindingly bright heavy armor landed one after another, until over twenty stood behind the man. The next instant, there came a rustle of wind from behind Chang Geng. Just as he was about to turn his head, a hand landed on his shoulder, stopping him—the newcomer was Shen Yi in his Black Carapace.

Stained with a new coat of blood, the black iron encasing Shen Yi's body seemed all the more bleak.

Ge Pangxiao's eyes widened so much they nearly rolled out of their sockets. "Shen…Shen-xiansheng?"

Turning aside, Chang Geng spat out a mouthful of blood. “That’s a general of the Black Iron Battalion and a member of the Marquis of Anding’s retinue. You should address him with more respect.”

Ge Pangxiao’s tongue twisted itself into a ball of twine as every piece of flesh on his plump body stuttered in unison. “Th-th-the Marquis of Anding!”

Guilt-ridden, Shen Yi reached toward Ge Pangxiao with a black-iron-encased hand.

The hand was the size of the boy’s head and covered in gore. Ge Pangxiao squeezed his eyes shut and shrank back, but that iron hand merely cupped the back of his head with a touch softer than a feather landing. It didn’t break so much as a single strand of hair on his head.

Shen Yi stepped in front of the youths, blocking them from view. Then, holding his position, he turned toward the man at the end of the alleyway. “I’ve heard that the head wolf of the Eighteen Tianlang Tribes, King Getu, has an extraordinary son named—”

“Jialai,” the barbarian responded mildly. “In the language of the Central Plains, it means ‘Yinghuo,’ the planet Mars.”

“Greetings, Crown Prince Jialai Yinghuo.” Gripping his windslasher in one hand, Shen-xiansheng made a fist with the other and placed it before his chest, offering the barbarians’ customary greeting.

“Tell me your name, demon crow,” said the barbarian prince.

“I am merely an insignificant soldier. My name is unfit to be uttered by your noble mouth.” Shen Yi smiled briefly, then asked in that soft, scholarly, and eminently reasonable way of his, “It has been over a decade since the Eighteen Northern Tribes declared allegiance to Great Liang, and in that time we have shared friendly diplomatic relations. The payment of tribute and exchange of commerce has always been peaceful. I do not believe that Great Liang has treated your people unfairly. So may I ask why your soldiers have appeared uninvited to draw weapons on the defenseless women and children of our nation?”

Ge Pangxiao was flabbergasted. Earlier that morning, Shen-xiansheng had been wearing his ridiculous apron, cursing as he’d puttered about the stove. Now, standing alone in his somber Black Carapace before a

contingent of barbarian soldiers, he seemed unshakable—a man who would forge courageously ahead in the face of overwhelming odds.

The barbarian prince met Shen Yi's eyes. He scoffed softly, then offered an insincere smile before returning his gaze to Chang Geng. Speaking fluently in the official language of Great Liang, he said, "On my way here, my brothers reported meeting members of the Black Iron Battalion all the way out in this border town. I thought they were scaremongering, but I see now that it's true. In that case…could the other rumor be true as well? Is the son of the goddess who was seized by the Emperor of the Central Plains really hidden here?"

Chang Geng's heart thudded fiercely in his chest.

The barbarian prince examined Chang Geng's face until it seemed he couldn't bear to look at him any longer. The hulking warrior tilted his head back slightly to look up. Veiled with clouds, the overcast sky was reflected in the abyss of his eyes. He murmured to some god in the firmament, "The goddess of our Eighteen Celestial Wolf Tribes is the purest spirit of the grasslands. All living creatures who lay eyes on her bow their heads, and even the heavenly winds seek to kiss the hem of her skirt. The land on which she sings and dances flocks with cattle and sheep in the coming year and flourishes with lush vegetation, the numberless blooming flowers stretching to the very edge of the Eternal Sky…"

There was a peculiar rhythm to his words, as though he was humming a shepherd's song from the grasslands.

"You Central Plains folk," the barbarian prince said, "occupied our pasturelands, hollowed out the heart's blood of the earth, and stole away our goddess. And now, you ask me why we have come. Isn't this question absurd? Your distinguished nation has been led by virtuous leaders for many years. They enlightened legions of people during their rule, but in the end, did you only learn thievery? You may be a member of the Black Iron Battalion, but you're all alone here. I advise you to step aside and hand that little mixed-breed bastard over to me. I will commit him to the flames to seek atonement from the Eternal Sky and appease the wrath of the defiled goddess. Truly I…cannot stand to look at his face any longer!"

Ge Pangxiao's mind had been a muddle since the conversation began, but upon hearing these words, he finally managed to stitch together some

bits and pieces of the conversation. Breathlessly, he asked, “Dage, the little mixed—*ahem*, the person he’s talking about, is that you?”

Chang Geng said numbly, with an air of misery, “Can you please stop talking?”

“So what Your Highness means to say is…” Shen Yi shook his head helplessly. “I see the guilty party is crying ‘thief’ first. Very well. There’s no point in the two of us retreading the facts of the Northern Expedition fourteen years ago. If it’s a fight that you seek, let us begin.”

His words landed with the finality of an iron nail hitting the ground. The low walls enclosing the narrow alleyway were flattened in an instant by those towering suits of heavy armor. The two ranks of northern barbarian warriors split up and surrounded Shen Yi and Chang Geng, approaching with murderous intent.

Shen Yi unsheathed a dagger and handed it to Chang Geng. “Please be careful, Your Highness.”

Though Shen-xiansheng spoke with utmost politeness, his methods were vicious. The words had barely left his mouth before he struck the first blow. A three-meter-long jet of steam erupted from the back plate of his Black Carapace armor, and the windslasher shot out of his hand with a shrill rasp, like a flashing cyclone. His strike caught the three closest barbarian warriors unaware, shattering the gold tanks over their hearts in one fell swoop and causing their suits to lock them in place.

The barbarian prince led the charge with an ear-splitting roar, a gust of sweltering wind rising in his wake.

Even as he met the attack without the slightest hesitation, Shen Yi shouted to Chang Geng and Ge Pangxiao, “Run!”

The Black Carapace armor of the Black Iron Battalion was an exquisite weapon indeed—perhaps a bit *too* exquisite. It was said that a Black Carapace was some twenty kilograms lighter than an ordinary suit of heavy armor. Shen Yi already resembled a weak scholar and wasn’t nearly as robust as the barbarian prince. Raising his windslasher with both hands, he managed to block his opponent’s thunderous strike, but was forced to take several steps back.

As the two suits of heavy armor clashed, every one of the low walls, courtyards, and stone houses surrounding them collapsed into untidy heaps. Not even the giant, century-old trees were spared from destruction.

The barbarian prince shouted, “Seize the little mixed-breed brat!”

Having received their orders, several heavy-armored barbarian soldiers moved at once. Snow-white steam filled the air as they intercepted that pair of youths with only three working legs between them.

Chang Geng held his dagger at an angle before him. His injured leg, unable to bear any weight, hung limply to one side. The clamoring beat inside his chest made him feel his heart was about to explode, and his childish face was grim. The aggressive wolfishness hidden deep within his blood had been forced to the surface during this face-off with the barbarian warriors. So what if this so-called “goddess” was his mysterious mother—even if she was, what kind of bizarre ritual demanded a son be sacrificed to his mother at a burning altar?

Standing amid the clamor and the dust, Ge Pangxiao wiped away his snot and asked stupidly, “Dage, are you really a ‘Highness’? Doesn’t that mean you’re moving up in the world?”

“Like hell I’m moving up in the world,” Chang Geng retorted. “They’ve got the wrong person—and we’re about to die. Shouldn’t you be running away?”

Ge Pangxiao puffed out his chest. “I won’t run. I want to follow my dage… Oh crap!”

A pair of barbarian soldiers lunged at them from either side. One of them grabbed Ge Pangxiao, who had spoken with such boldness only seconds ago, and hoisted him overhead, intending to dash his brains out against the ground. But Ge Pangxiao was blessed with sharp eyes and agile hands. Flailing like a puppy on the brink of death, he grasped the branches of a nearby tree and, with a burst of inhuman strength that came from staring death in the eye, managed to clamber his way into the tree.

Inhuman as his strength might be, his pants were still made of mortal cloth. With a ripping sound, they were torn away. Whether it was out of resourcefulness or abject fear, who could say, but upon witnessing the destruction of his pants, Ge Pangxiao seized the opportunity and emptied a

full bladder’s worth of virgin boy urine right into that heavy-armored barbarian’s face.

It just so happened that the warrior had pushed his visor up. He received the offering in full, wasting not a single drop.

The barbarian soldier flew into a mad rage. With a furious roar, he swung his iron fist outwards, determined to beat the little brat to death. Yet to his surprise, he suddenly lost control of his legs. Chang Geng, it turned out, had managed to evade the enemies’ attacks and slip through. While the barbarian was frozen under the tree, he took careful aim and jammed his dagger into the joint of the warrior’s steel greaves at a cunning angle.

As expected of a weapon forged by the Black Iron Battalion, the dagger was razor-sharp, easily slicing through one side of the protective steel armor covering the warrior’s leg. The barbarian soldier lost his balance, falling to his knees and blocking his compatriots completely. Ge Pangxiao scurried up the tree like a chubby monkey and vaulted with nimble feet onto a neighboring rooftop. He valiantly picked up a brick from a nearby section of wall and called out to Chang Geng, “Dage, get out of the way!”

White steam jetted out from the soles of Chang Geng’s feet. He didn’t have time to stand up before the steel greaves strapped to his legs dragged him some dozen meters away. Moments after the warning was issued, a large slab of stone fell from the sky and smashed the barbarian’s helmet with a resounding crash so loud it seemed to reverberate for three days and nights.

“How dare you bastards pants me!” Ge Pangxiao shouted. “I’ll show you!”

Chang Geng was covered in dirt from being dragged along the ground. Just as he was about to struggle onto his remaining good leg, a weight clamped down over his nape. A giant iron hand descended from the skies, lifting him by the scruff of the neck. Chang Geng reflexively reached for his iron cuff, but that barbarian soldier didn’t give him a chance to fight back, intending to slam him directly into a wall.

Shen Yi had his hands full fending off the barbarian prince. He was too far away to help—

There came the shrill whinny of a horse, and a gleaming iron arrow shot through the sky with inescapable force. Punching through the thick steel plates of armor, it pinned the barbarian holding Chang Geng against a low section of wall.

Unable to bear the weight of the heavy armor, the low wall collapsed. Chang Geng landed in a pile of wreckage, somewhat worse for wear. Hearing the piercing screech of a bird of prey, he glanced up and saw a pair of enormous black shadows circling in the sky. The range of their longbows and iron arrows high above engulfed the barbarian prince's eighteen iron warriors.

The barbarian prince lifted his head, glaring so fiercely he nearly tore his eyes out of their sockets. "Black Hawks!"

"That they are," said a voice a short distance away. "Long time no see. The three divisions of the Black Iron Battalion pay their respects to Your Highness."

Chang Geng's entire body jolted at the familiarity of that voice. Kneeling amongst broken debris, he turned to stare in disbelief at the man in light armor who had arrived on horseback.

This man was wearing the lightest class of armor, also known as light pelt. An armor specially designed for riding, it weighed less than fifteen kilograms in total. He wore no visor and held his helmet carelessly in one hand, revealing a face that had once invaded Chang Geng's dreams. The cinnabar beauty mark at the corner of his eye burned a scorching red.

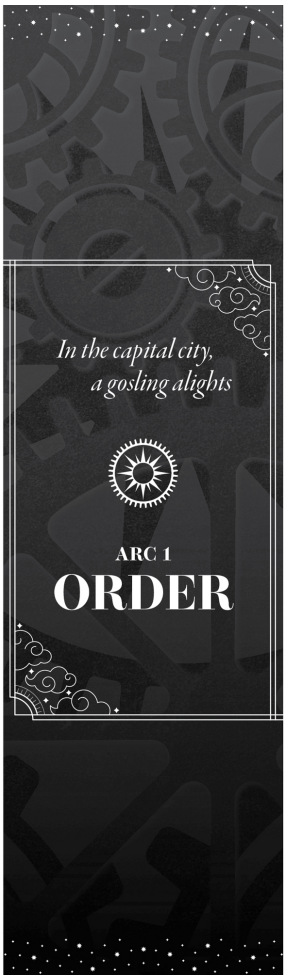
Ge Pangxiao swayed slightly where he was perched on the wall and nearly tumbled off. He pinched himself sharply on the thigh. "My god… Aren't you Uncle Shiliu?"

"That's right, my dear little nephew."

"Shiliu" blithely nudged his steed forward, as if the enemy ranks were beneath his notice. He haughtily drew a windslasher from his waist, which he used to push aside the body of the barbarian soldier. Then, he turned back to Ge Pangxiao and heckled him good-naturedly, "Little brat, what are you doing swinging your sausage around like that in public? At least find yourself a leaf or something."

Embarrassed, Ge Pangxiao hastily reached down to cover himself.

Chang Geng stared at him unwaveringly, forgetting for a time where he was. Meeting his eyes, Shiliu dismounted from his horse and bent slightly to offer Chang Geng his hand. “Your subject, Gu Yun, has arrived late. Please forgive me, Your Highness.”


In the capital city,
a gosling alights
ARC 1
ORDER

# Chapter 11:
# Reeling in the Net

GU YUN WASN'T NATURALLY disposed toward modesty or open-mindedness. The reckless frivolity of youth had been ground out of him by the yellow sands of the Western Regions, and he now had some semblance of restraint. But just as a dog can't resist eating shit, one's nature is difficult to change. He was arrogant and obstinate; praise or insult, he never took anyone's words seriously.

Yet early that morning, when Gu Yun had been drinking wine under the alias of Shen Shiliu, he heard Shen Yi say that Chang Geng was tracing his handwriting. At that moment, his emotions were impossible to describe.

For the first time in his life, Gu Yun felt terrified. He wished desperately to grow several more useless pairs of ears so he might hear every word Chang Geng said about his writing—both the good and the bad. At the same time, he secretly worried that his own abilities were inadequate, that he would hamper Chang Geng's progress and lead him astray. Perhaps this was how all fathers felt the first time they overheard their children say, "I want to be just like my dad when I grow up."

Shen Yi once asked what he would do if Chang Geng grew to hate him. Gu Yun had countered with shameless boasting—but that had all been a bluff.

Now Marshal Gu revealed his true identity before this magnificent army in grand style. He gazed down at his godson with a perfectly unruffled expression, hoping to see a hint of happy surprise—even if there were more surprise than happiness, he could live with it—only to be greeted by a blank apathy more pitiless than death. With his perfectly unruffled expression plastered on his face, he felt his heart trip over in his chest with a *thunk*.

*Oh no*, Gu Yun thought to himself, *this time he's really angry.*

There are some people who are naturally affable and affectionate. Despite being the target of a wealth of malicious intent, they maintain their

fragile kindness through their own strenuous efforts. This type of person is very rare, but Chang Geng had the potential to become such an individual.

In the blink of an eye, his life had undergone a massive upheaval. Before he had the wherewithal to sort through the murky truth of his own history, he had been sucked into the chaos of the barbarian invasion. Yet despite his uncertainty about the future, his helpless anger at his present circumstances, and the misgivings he had about the mysterious Shen brothers and their unknown origins, he had still wanted to save Ge Pangxiao. And he couldn't help but feel deeply worried about "Shen Shiliu" when his whereabouts were unaccounted for.

All this time, Chang Geng had been thinking about how the entire city was filled with murderous barbarians right now. If Shen-xiansheng was here by his side, then what of his little yifu who took forever just to step over the threshold at the front gate of his house? Who would protect him? Who would help his escape?

But all his worries and anxieties scattered away into flying ash the moment he heard the name "Gu Yun."

Chang Geng had no idea how to face Shiliu—Gu Yun—anymore.

How laughable.

How could the world-renowned Marshal Gu be a blind and deaf invalid? What need had he for Chang Geng's concern? Furthermore, why would Gu Yun appear in this insignificant backwater town? The Black Iron Battalion had originally been stationed in the far-off Western Regions—how could they possibly assemble so quickly? Had that barbarian crown prince really managed to catch everyone off guard, or had he simply stumbled into someone else's trap?

Each of these thoughts exploded across Chang Geng's mind like fireworks, but he didn't have the heart to scrutinize them. Instead, he felt a sharp pain in his chest. It turned out that the sentimental concerns he'd nurtured all this time were just him getting ahead of himself while showering one-sided affection on an uninterested party. Chang Geng had already learned the meaning of *fear* and *disappointment* at a tender age. Thanks to Xiu-niang, he had also felt too many times what it was like to be in despair and on the brink of death.

Yet in all this time, he had never realized that a notion like *awkwardness* could rend his heart to pieces with grief.

Seeing the way Chang Geng looked at him through red-rimmed eyes, Gu Yun finally unearthed a twinge of guilt from his derelict conscience. Right there, in full view of so many enemy troops, he got down on one knee as if no one else were present and carefully removed the steel greave from Chang Geng's injured leg. He pressed a few times with his light-armored palms and said, "You dislocated your ankle—not too big a deal. Does it hurt?"

Chang Geng didn't make a sound.

Gu Yun sighed. This kid usually liked to sulk and act cute with him, but at the same time, Chang Geng was always worrying about him. Now, seeing the boy regard him with such distant eyes, Gu Yun felt an unexpected hint of regret.

But it lasted only a moment. In no time at all, the hard-hearted and unfeeling Marquis of Anding had accepted the situation and moved on: it had already come to this, so what use was regret?

Without revealing a hint of his emotional turmoil, he dipped his head and lifted Chang Geng's injured leg with an indifferent expression. Without so much as a word of warning, he wrenched out and pushed in, popping the dislocated ankle back into place.

Chang Geng's entire body quivered violently, but he didn't cry out in pain. Even if someone were to stab him with a knife right now, he probably wouldn't feel it.

Gu Yun picked him up and set him on the back of his horse. Finding himself newly unable to handle his godson, he switched over to bullying the barbarian soldiers.

Gu Yun had dismounted, faced Chang Geng, and set the boy's dislocated ankle without looking up once—it was as if all the armor-wearing, weapon-brandishing enemies around him were nothing. But astonishingly, during that long moment, no one had dared act rashly. Perhaps it was because the character "Gu" on the commander's banner was alone sufficient to strike terror into the hearts of these grassland wolves.

The barbarian prince's eyes were filled with the deep hatred of blood-debt as he gazed at this man. Fourteen years ago, Gu Yun's father, the former marquis, had been the primary architect of the eighteen tribes' slaughter. The Wolf King—this crown prince's father—now walked using a pair of craggy prosthetic legs thanks to Old Marquis Gu.

The crown prince was no fool. Even a child like Chang Geng with his mind in turmoil could muddle out the truth, so of course the prince understood the situation. The moment he saw Gu Yun, he knew the game was as good as lost. As if in response to his thoughts, there came a shrill whistle from somewhere nearby as a pale beacon launched into the sky like a firework and lit up the heavens.

Like flashes of dark lightning, the inky shadows of seven or eight Black Hawks alighted, one after another, on the giant kite.

Black Hawks were the giant kite's greatest nemesis. The source of these barbarians' armor remained a mystery, but they were still novices

when it came to their use. Sure, they looked scary wearing them, but how could they possibly compare to the pinnacle of excellence that was the Black Iron Battalion?

Standing amid the chaos, Gu Yun shifted his gaze and opened his arrogant mouth. “How’s Wolf King Getu, my dear defeated opponent, doing? Sprightly as ever, I hope?”

Even as Shen Yi had condemned the barbarian prince to his face and fought him head-on, he had remained unfailingly polite from beginning to end, exhibiting the righteous poise expected of the representative of an indomitable power. Thus, the barbarian prince couldn’t quite adjust to Marshal Gu’s manner of speech and nearly choked on an angry mouthful of blood, “You…”

“I’ve long heard about a particularly ambitious prince amongst the eighteen tribes who devised some scheme called the Gold Corrosion Stratagem,” Gu Yun sneered contemptuously. “No offense, Your Highness, but given your pitiful abilities, did you *really* think you’d be able to scarf down the whole of Great Liang in a single bite? Aren’t you worried your stomach might burst?”

This time, the crown prince’s expression was as dark as midnight.

The Gold Corrosion Stratagem was a top-secret mission of the Tianlang Tribe. It had been planned by Prince Yinghuo himself when he began to assume control within the tribe. While Great Liang’s armor and steam technology had advanced by leaps and bounds, the Tianlang Tribe had missed a key opportunity to do the same. As a consequence, they had been beaten so hard these past ten years they barely had time to catch their breath. Before the sophisticated heavy armor and giant kite, even the most exceptional martial expert in the world was nothing more than a mantis attempting to stop a chariot. Prince Yinghuo had a sensible head on his shoulders. He yearned to wreak vengeance and redress his hatred, but he knew attacking his enemy directly was a fool’s errand.

Unless, of course, Great Liang rotted from within.

Although Great Liang was blessed with vast territory and abundant resources, the nation lacked significant natural deposits of violet gold. Violet gold was the lifeline of the nation, and Great Liang couldn’t afford any mishaps with respect to its handling. Thus, the imperial court issued a

decree prohibiting commercial sales of violet gold. Violators of the decree were charged with conspiracy against the state and punished accordingly. Among those who were caught, it wasn't unusual for their entire family to be executed. Engines, puppets, and other machines used by commoners that needed motive power required letters of guarantee from local magistrates, officials, imperial examination candidates, and other respected figures of society. Only then might their operators purchase mid-grade violet gold from the court-sanctioned shops of imperial merchants.

But violet gold was also highly profitable, so the black market continued unabated despite the prohibitions. As the saying went, just as birds die pursuing food, so too do men die pursuing wealth. Since ancient times, there have been no shortage of renegades willing to risk their lives for money.

It wasn't enough just to risk your life; you had to find a supplier too. The earliest "gold merchants" on the black market were people who'd run off to the grasslands hoping to try their luck. Very few of them got lucky, and most ended up dying halfway there.

Targeting Great Liang's black market, the Tianlang Tribe threw all their hard-earned capital into killing their golden goose and dug up huge quantities of violet gold every year. After delivering the yearly tribute, they used the excess violet gold to line the pockets of officers along the border, eating through Great Liang's defenses little by little. Hence the name "Gold Corrosion."

The Tianlang Tribe had begun laying groundwork for this stratagem seven or eight years ago. Later, the barbarians established contact with Huge'er, who had settled in Yanhui Town. The two parties had coordinated and prepared for years. Prince Yinghuo had been confident that he held all the major settlements along the northern border within his grasp.

These plans had been known only by the heavens, the earth, and the mastermind himself—how in the world had Gu Yun learned about it? Was he really blessed with uncanny magical abilities?

In the time it took to exchange this handful of words, the battle in the sky was settled, the result a foregone conclusion.

The despicable Gu Yun had yet to finish. With his hands clasped behind his back, he opened his mouth again to rub salt in the wound, "Let

me be honest with you, Your Highness. I've been waiting for you in this godforsaken place for so long I'd begun having nightmares every day. I was so worried you wouldn't show up—and if you didn't, what justification would I have for mopping up all these vermin who only know to eat from government coffers without doing a day of work? So really, you have my heartfelt thanks!"

The barbarian prince looked like he wanted to tear out Gu Yun's tendons and skin him alive.

Seeing the man's face turn red as a lantern from rage, the powerlessness Gu Yun felt from his meeting with Chang Geng finally eased. He revealed a vicious smile. "The Gold Corrosion Stratagem. Ha ha, how clever—but enough with the small talk. Seize him!"

Having said his piece, Gu Yun took up the lead rope of Chang Geng's horse. "My apologies for frightening you, Your Highness. Please allow me to guide your horse."

Chang Geng glared daggers at him with all his might, but no matter how sharp his eyes, Gu Yun remained impervious. It was just like how, no matter how Shen-xiansheng yelled at him to wash the dishes, none of his scolding words ever got through.

Chang Geng muttered under his breath, "The Marquis of Anding has come all the way to this backwater to live incognito without even a retainer at his side. All that scheming must have been so hard on you."

In the past, no matter how furious he was, he never had the heart to speak harshly toward Shiliu. His scornful words seemed to choke him half to death as they escaped his throat, his hands turning pale from his tight grip on the reins.

*He's so angry he won't even acknowledge me as his godfather anymore,* Gu Yun thought with a touch of melancholy. *What am I to do with him now?*

He'd always been very good at setting off explosions; anyone he set off would promptly blow up in a rage. But he'd never been good at cleaning up the aftermath of such blasts. For some reason, every time he tried to admit his mistake and patch up a quarrel, he only ended up angering the other person more. Gu Yun braced himself, then softened his voice and

explained to Chang Geng, “This military operation is the reason I couldn’t reveal my identity to Your Highness. I’ve committed many offenses and taken great advantage of Your Highness up till now. Nevertheless, it is my hope that when we return to the capital, Your Highness will not lodge complaints against me with His Majesty the Emperor…”

Before he could finish speaking, Ge Pangxiao cried out from where he sat perched on the wall, “Look out!”

At some point, a barbarian had hidden himself amid the debris. This warrior cranked the power of his steel greaves up to the highest setting and appeared behind Gu Yun in the blink of an eye, swinging his sword down with a furious bellow. From his seat on the horse, Chang Geng glimpsed the incoming enemy out of the corner of his eye. In that moment of desperation, he no longer cared about the acrid bitterness flooding his heart—he instinctively threw himself forward to protect Gu Yun from the long blade.

“Yifu!”

White steam erupted from the soles of Gu Yun’s feet, and his figure flickered out of sight for an instant before reappearing mounted on his horse. Chang Geng felt something tighten around his waist as his back collided with Gu Yun’s light chest plate. A dark shadow flashed before his eyes—the windslasher in Gu Yun’s hands had yet to release its blades and looked like a polished black-iron staff. Yet the sharp end had already sunk with unbelievable accuracy into the joint between neck and shoulder on the enemy’s heavy armor. The heavy armor’s shoulders immediately froze as the barbarian’s iron arm let out a horrible, toothache-inducing screech and locked tightly in place. The oncoming sword froze in midair, the blade of the weapon barely six centimeters from Gu Yun’s forehead.

He hadn’t even blinked.

Gu Yun let out a low chuckle. Then he squeezed his legs, and the warhorse sprang forward with a long whinny. The hand he had looped around Chang Geng’s waist slid upward until it was firmly covering the youth’s eyes. The motion of the galloping warhorse spurred the windslasher into action. Steam rushed out with a soft explosive sound and meter-long blades swung out from their sheaths, mangling the barbarian’s body from the shoulders up.

A blast of warm steam washed over Chang Geng’s neck, and he shivered uncontrollably. Only then did he smell the metallic tang of blood.

Hidden beneath the light pelt armor, the bitter fragrance that clung to Gu Yun’s body as though he had soaked in a medicinal bath was undetectable. In that moment, Chang Geng felt as if the person sitting behind him was a complete and utter stranger.

It was as if his little yifu had never existed at all.

# Chapter 12:
# Giving a Full Account

THE BARBARIANS HAD THROWN everything they had into this stratagem, turning out in full force with all their heavy armor to launch a surprise attack on Yanhui Town. What did all this heavy armor—costly weapons that even Great Liang struggled to fund—mean to the Eighteen Barbarian Tribes? Exhausting all their people's blood, sweat, and tears still wouldn't have earned them nearly enough to afford such weapons—they would have had to scrape out their bone marrow three times over to pay for it all.

The barbarians of the north grew up tussling with wild wolves; they were naturally disposed to war. Now, with the execution of their carefully laid plot and the attainment of this heavy armor infantry, they should have been able to sweep away all those who blocked their path with a single all-out attack.

Unfortunately for them, they happened to run afoul of the Black Iron Battalion.

The Black Hawks effortlessly seized control of the giant kite, while the Black Carapaces captured the barbarian prince alive before slaughtering the defeated remnants of his troops throughout the town with Gu Yun's tacit permission. The sun hadn't even begun to set, yet the battle was already over.

But things didn't end there.

After making quick work of the foreign enemies, Gu Yun turned his blade on his own side, like a bolt of lightning out of a clear sky. Exploiting the awe inspired by the Black Iron Battalion's phenomenal power, he unilaterally arrested over sixty major and minor military officers from Yanhui Town, Changyang Pass, and other settlements along the northern border in one fell swoop and detained them all to await interrogation. Great apprehension settled over the northern border as everyone began to fear for their own safety.

For the time being, Chang Geng and Ge Pangxiao were staying at the residence of Yanhui Town's Magistrate, Magistrate Guo. The mere sight of Gu Yun had Magistrate Guo trembling with the fear of being implicated himself. When it became clear that he was instead being tasked with looking after the young prince, he realized he'd narrowly dodged disaster. He didn't dare neglect the boy even slightly. Two ranks of servants were sent to the courtyard where Chang Geng was staying to wait on him. Short of personally pouring Chang Geng's tea, he did his utmost to be the perfect host.

Ge Pangxiao, benefiting from his association with Chang Geng, also enjoyed the deferential treatment reserved for the imperial family. After recovering from the turmoil of war, the little porker had realized all of a sudden that he was now a destitute orphan and burst into tears. It wasn't until halfway through his sobbing fit that he remembered Chang Geng was alone and helpless as well. Granted, he still had family in the form of his godfather, but Shiliu seemed to have completely disappeared and never came to see him. Ge Pangxiao couldn't help but empathize with Chang Geng. Now he felt rather embarrassed for wailing so loudly in front of him.

But besides crying, there wasn't much else to do. Counting on his fingers, Ge Pangxiao tried to string together all the key events from that day. In the end, he gave up. It was all too complicated for him to understand and no matter how he turned things over in his head, they ended up a tangled mess.

"Dage," he asked Chang Geng, "they said your dad's the emperor, so then does that mean Aunt Xiu was the empress?"

Chang Geng was holding half a silk dart. When he had saved Ge Pangxiao that day, he shot a single dart from his iron cuff. He had secretly gone to recover it later while clearing the battlefield. When it came to ironwork, it was generally difficult to preserve both sharpness and durability. Though the silk darts housed inside the cloud wrist cuff could cut through iron like it was mud, they were brittle. The sharp end of the dart Chang Geng shot had broken off, embedded in that barbarian warrior's heavy armor. Then, in the heat of the boiling violet gold, the dart had melted. All that was left was a bare piece of black iron without even a cutting edge.

Chang Geng scraped the uneven surface of the broken dart with an iron nail and responded absently, “It’s not like the empress gives birth to all the emperor’s sons. His Majesty has plenty of wives. Xiu-niang was a member of the barbarian tribes. I’m not some imperial prince or anything either, it’s just that barbarian woman was trying to pass me off as one.”

The youngest son of the butcher felt all the more lost after hearing this explanation. He gaped in confusion for a long while, overwhelmed with feelings of pity for his dage. Even wild beasts had a mother and father; Chang Geng alone had no understanding of his own familial background. The mystery of his parents was like a gigantic ball of knotted twine—for all anyone knew, they could be divine beings.

“You can rest assured, Dage,” Ge Pangxiao vowed solemnly, “no matter who your dad is—the emperor, a company commander, or some lowly opera singer—you’ll always be my dage!”

At first, the corners of Chang Geng’s mouth twitched stiffly upward. But in the end, he seemed to appreciate the sentiment and offered him a vague but genuine smile.

“It’d be amazing if I could join the Black Iron Battalion someday too,” Ge Pangxiao said.

Before Chang Geng could respond, a voice called from outside, “Members of the Black Iron Battalion are nothing like ordinary soldiers. Their daily training regimen is extremely arduous. Are you sure you can handle such hardship?”

The pair of youths looked up to see Shen Yi striding through the door.

Shen Yi had removed that terrifying suit of black armor and instantly transformed back into that long-winded and destitute scholar, the living embodiment of the word “poor.” He walked in carrying two boxes of food, which he set on the table. “I brought you a late supper. Eat up.”

Magistrate Guo attached great importance to health, so supper at his residence was usually soup or other light fare. This was fine for adults—it made little difference whether they had a few more bites to eat or not—but how could a half-grown youngster endure such privation? Ge Pangxiao had slurped down three bowls of chicken noodle soup and still felt like he’d

only filled his stomach with water. Even the comfortable layer of fat on his body seemed to have deflated. At the sight of the generously stuffed buns, steamed rolls, and meat inside the meal box, his eyes shone with ravenous hunger. He lunged forward with a joyful cry, casting any thoughts of Black or White Iron Battalions to the back of his mind.

But the little porker was very generous. He might forget the whole world, but he would never forget his dage. He bounced over and eagerly handed Chang Geng a plump meat bun. “Dage, here you go.”

Chang Geng peered around Shen Yi but did not catch sight of the person he most wanted to see. His appetite vanished immediately. Waving Ge Pangxiao aside with a listless hand, he forced down the disappointment in his heart and offered a lackluster greeting. “General Shen.”

“I dare not claim the honor of that title.” Shen Yi knew with a single glance at his face exactly what the youth was thinking, but nevertheless, he casually took a seat at the side of the table. “With the ongoing purge of the frontier defenses, Marshal Gu is up to his ears in work and genuinely cannot step away,” he explained. “However, he’s deeply concerned about Your Highness and charged me with checking in on you.”

“The feeling is mutual, as I likewise dare not accept such an honor.” Chang Geng lowered his head indifferently and fell silent for a spell. Then he said coolly, “Shiliu…the marquis is so busy managing state affairs every day, I’m amazed he has time to think of us at all.”

Shen Yi smiled. “If the marshal knew how coldly you speak of him behind his back, he’d surely be dismayed. Unfortunately, he’s the type of person who never expresses his feelings directly when he’s upset, but instead comes up with all sorts of creative ways to pick quarrels with others. It’s really quite tough being his subordinate at such times.”

Chang Geng didn’t respond for a while, his attention seemingly focused on the broken blade in his hands. He picked a spot on the dart with utmost care and began to slowly bore a hole through the metal with the iron nail. The youth understood the situation with perfect clarity. He didn’t believe for a second that Shen Yi was an ordinary subordinate. Even on an undercover mission, what kind of subordinate would dare order the Marquis of Anding to wash the dishes and cook congee? That is, unless the god of

longevity had hung himself and the subordinate in question had become tired of living.

Everyone was silent. The atmosphere became unbearably awkward.

Though Shen Yi remained smiling, he was cursing internally. Chang Geng's attitude was clearly aimed at Gu Yun, yet that bastard buried his head in the sand and shoved Shen Yi over as a scapegoat. *Ever since I fell in with that bastard Gu*, he thought to himself, *I've only ever run into trouble.*

Shen Yi hailed from an aristocratic family. In fact, he was distantly related to the old marquis on his mother's side. Back when the late marquis was still alive, he brought Shen Yi to stay at the Gu family home. Half the heroic acts of mischief Gu Yun committed in his childhood owed their success to Shen Yi's meritorious service. It was only later, when the old marquis and the princess both passed away, that the two parted ways. Gu Yun inherited his father's noble title and moved into the imperial palace, while Shen Yi achieved scholarly honors through the imperial examination. Yet after passing the exams with flying colors, he refused to enter the Hanlin Academy.[15] Instead, in a move everyone around him considered abject lunacy, he applied for admission to Lingshu.

Despite its name, the Lingshu Institute had absolutely nothing to do with decocting medicine or diagnosing illness.[16] Rather than fixing human bodies, the Institute's sole purpose was to build and repair machines. Like the Imperial Guard, it was under the direct oversight of the emperor. This institute was the greatest leech on the Ministry of Revenue's coffers, as well as the kindly benefactor of the two Ministries of Works and War.

The eight major military branches of the Great Liang Army consisted of the Kite, Carapace, Steed, Pelt, Hawk, Chariot, Cannon, and Dragon Divisions. The schematics for each division's equipment, the plans for improvements and upgrades, and even the trade secrets of the Black Iron Battalion—all of it came from the Lingshu Institute.

Members of the Lingshu Institute often joked self-deprecatingly that they were "His Majesty's Personal Artificers." They rarely participated in important matters raised in the imperial court and were not found among high-ranking officials. Most of the time, they preferred to hole away in the Lingshu Institute and tinker with those iron fellows. Nevertheless, no one

dared put them on equal footing with common tradesmen who eked out an oil-soaked living.

Gu Yun hadn't been able to drag the Black Iron Battalion back into existence all those years ago simply because of the urgency of the war and a flimsy decree issued with a flick of the imperial hand. Much of the credit lay with his old friend Shen Yi, who helped him grease the wheels at the Lingshu Institute. At the critical moment, the Lingshu Institute stood behind the young general and lent him their powerful support. Thanks to their backing, the military force that had fallen into decline for over a decade could once again stand up to the wagging tongues of the elite literati.

After the revival of the Black Iron Battalion, Shen Yi left the Lingshu Institute and accepted Gu Yun's invitation to become his personal armor mechanic.

It went without saying that Chang Geng, with his narrow experience of the world, had no inkling of these messy backstories. Nor did Shen Yi have any intention of laying them all out. He merely raised his head and said to Ge Pangxiao, "There are a few things that I need to tell His Highness. Could you please…"

Quick-witted as always, Ge Pangxiao promptly said, "Uh-huh, sure thing, you two go ahead and talk. I'm sleepy after eating so much anyway, so I oughta get to bed."

He grabbed two more meat buns, shoved a giant hunk of pork shoulder into his mouth, hopped down from his chair, and scampered off. When all the irrelevant people had left the room, Shen Yi slowly began to speak.

"Back when the war in the Western Regions began to stabilize, Marshal Gu received a secret imperial decree from His Majesty the Emperor. It commanded him to travel to the northern border to track down and retrieve the fourth prince, who had vanished with the noble consort's younger sister all those years ago."

Chang Geng's hands paused in their motions and he looked up, gazing wordlessly at Shen Yi.

Shen Yi continued without missing a beat, his expression open and sincere. "As we neared Yanhui Town, we discovered signs of barbarian

activity beyond the town gates. Perhaps Your Highness is not aware, but the heir of the Wolf King has always shown signs of great ambition. By then, he had long harbored thoughts of sedition. Concerned that misfortune would befall the northern border, Marshal Gu stopped to investigate.

"To his surprise, he encountered Your Highness surrounded by a pack of wolves. Marshal Gu spent much of his childhood at the side of the eldest princess and once had the pleasure of meeting the noble consort. The moment he saw Your Highness, he felt you were familiar. It was only once we brought you home and met Xiu-niang that we were able to verify that you were indeed the fourth prince we sought.

"Marshal Gu was a mere child when they met fourteen years ago, so Xiu-niang had long forgotten what he looked like. Initially, we planned to divulge our identities to her and bring you back to the capital. But to our surprise, we discovered Xiu-niang had been secretly passing information to the barbarians.

"To avoid alerting the enemy, Marshal Gu quietly transferred some of the troops stationed in the Western Regions to the northern border. He planned to draw the barbarians into a trap and give them a taste of their own medicine. Now the elite troops of the eighteen tribes have been obliterated, their crown prince has been captured, and their financial resources and manpower have been severely depleted by their own hand. At the very least, this will guarantee the northern border of Great Liang five years of peace. It is my hope that, for the sake of the tens of thousands of people living on the border, Your Highness does not fault your humble servants for our deception."

When Shen Yi finished, Chang Geng thought it over for a moment, then nodded very sensibly. "Mm."

Shen Yi breathed a sigh of relief, then smiled. "When the Tianlang Tribe of the northern barbarians surrendered to Great Liang, they gifted His Majesty two great treasures from their grasslands. One was violet gold, and the other was the goddess of the Tianlang Tribe. This goddess was extraordinarily precious to her people. To repay the members of the Tianlang Tribe for their sincerity, His Majesty bestowed upon her the title of Noble Consort. She was the only noble consort in the history of Great Liang. I already told you what happened to her the other day. If the noble

consort could see how much Your Highness has grown from where she lies beneath the Nine Springs, I'm sure she would be very proud."

Chang Geng sneered to himself. If this was all true, then didn't that make Xiu-niang—Huge'er—his aunt? If his mother's sister was so lacking in moral integrity, then how much better could his mother have been?

"According to common sense," Chang Geng said, "the real story is more likely that upon discovering she was pregnant with the vile spawn of her conqueror, this 'noble consort' did everything in her power to escape. Perhaps she even tried to induce an abortion to get rid of the child?"

Shen Yi fell silent. The secret affairs of the imperial harem were unfit for detailed discussion, but this little brat's guess was surprisingly accurate.

At the end of the day, Shen Yi was a sly huli jing[17] who had been hobnobbing with influential nobles and officials since childhood. No matter his thoughts, he didn't reveal a hint of them on his face. Instead, he assumed a convincing expression of muted alarm. "Your Highness, what are you saying? If this is about Miss Xiu, then there is no need to overthink. After all, Miss Xiu was a foreigner. The loyalty she felt toward her tribe is understandable. Besides, she wasn't the one who gave birth to Your Highness. Even if her heart was filled with resentment, she still spared no effort to raise Your Highness into adolescence and did everything she could to send Your Highness's half of that mandarin duck jade pendant back to the capital. I'm sure she had long been prepared to die for her nation. Isn't that clear evidence of her concern for you due to the blood you shared? If your aunt cared for you so, how could your mother not have loved you?"

Shen Yi paused, then added artfully, "Your Highness and the noble consort seem cast from the same mold. However, your temperament and disposition resemble His Majesty. Blood cannot lie. As for the incident where Miss Xiu broke Your Highness's toe, I'm sure there is some other explanation for her actions. It is also possible that, given your young age at the time, Your Highness has simply misremembered."

Shen-xiansheng's words were reasonable, his delivery surpassingly eloquent. If Chang Geng did not already know so well that he had been administered a slow-acting poison meant to eventually drive him insane, he probably would have been taken in by the story he spun. He might have even believed that Xiu-niang really did put a lot of thought into his care.

But now, this young boy no longer trusted the “truth” that spilled from another’s mouth so easily. His heart contained one peck of speculation and two bushels of doubt. He couldn’t help but pull apart and analyze every word spoken to him, and when he scrutinized any one thing slightly, he found himself filled with misgivings.

Chang Geng suddenly felt bone-weary.

After enough time had elapsed to burn through a stick of incense, Chang Geng politely ushered Shen Yi, whose smile had started to turn stiff, out of his temporary residence.

“I was ignorant and inexperienced in the past,” said Chang Geng as he walked Shen Yi to the door. “Thinking that Marquis Gu was disabled, I often troubled him with my long-winded nagging. I sincerely hope the marquis will forgive my indiscretion.”

Shen Yi looked down, but all he could see was the whorl of Chang Geng’s hair at the crown of his head. The boy refused to meet his eyes. He sighed and took his leave from Chang Geng’s small courtyard with a heavy heart. Stepping out of the gate and turning onto a narrow footpath, he was immediately treated to the sight of the legendary Gu Yun, who was “up to his ears in military affairs,” sitting in a little garden.

A profusion of mint plants grew in Magistrate Guo’s gardens. Gu Yun was sitting alone in a small pavilion, absent-mindedly picking leaves off the mint. He held each leaf in his mouth for a while, then chewed them up and swallowed them down. How long he sat there, who could say, but the mint plant beside him was picked nearly bald, looking for all the world like a shrub that had been ravaged by a mountain goat.

Shen Yi coughed softly, but Gu Yun didn’t seem to hear him. It was only when Shen Yi walked closer that Gu Yun, with some effort, squinted and recognized him.

“Has the medication worn off?” Shen Yi asked with a sigh.

Gu Yun’s expression turned bewildered. He instinctively tilted his head, making a gesture like he was struggling to hear. Shen Yi walked up to him and leaned in toward his ear. “Let’s head back first. I’ll tell you everything afterward—give me your hand. There’s a flight of stone steps over there.”

Gu Yun refused Shen Yi’s arm with a shake of his head and reached into his lapels for a glass monocle, which he set on the bridge of his nose. Without another word, he carefully made his way out of the pavilion. The beauty marks at the corner of his eye and on his earlobe seemed to have grown duller in color.

Shen Yi glanced at the mint bush that had been gnawed into a state of baldness by Gu the Mountain Goat before following after him.

# Chapter 13:
# Begging for Forgiveness

IN ACTUALITY, Gu Yun was staying right next door to Chang Geng. However, his lodgings seemed rather desolate by comparison.

If Chang Geng were to say, “There’s no need to wait on me,” Magistrate Guo would have made a shameless exhibition of himself and declared, “Not only is His Highness hardworking and frugal, he also loves his people dearly,” before herding some dozen servants over to his courtyard. But even if he had a whole burlap sack stuffed with entrails, he still wouldn’t have the guts to toady up to Marshal Gu.

Upon moving in, Gu Yun had said, light as a feather, “Don’t disturb me.” Aside from those terrifying Black Iron Battalion soldiers, no one dared take a single step into his temporary place of residence.

In the past, whenever Gu Yun couldn’t see or hear things clearly, he would become incredibly tense. He absolutely hated having unfamiliar people wandering around him back then. It had been a long time since Shen Yi had seen him in such a state of hypervigilance. He’d thought that after lying low in Yanhui Town for two years, Gu Yun had made peace with the blurry world around him. But now it seemed that was not the case.

Perhaps the one who had learned to peacefully coexist with his disability had been “Shen Shiliu” and not Gu Yun.

Although Gu Yun gave off the impression that he was calm and unruffled, always with a card up his sleeve, most of the time it was only an act. Yet this act was so lifelike, no one could see through his façade. At the same time, though he was genuinely blind and deaf, he often looked like he was faking his disabilities. And so it was that Marshal Gu earnestly made an example of himself, demonstrating the meaning of that famous line, “when that which is false is taken for truth, the truth becomes false.”[18] Even Shen Yi couldn’t tell whether there was something wrong with his brain, or if the deception was deliberate.

Oh, and also—his feelings truly were sincere, though this truth wasn't all that convincing either.

Dusk approached. The curtain of night had fallen, but the evening star had yet to reveal itself. The first thing Gu Yun did upon returning to his rooms was light all the lamps. Then, he removed his glass monocle, rubbed fiercely at his eye, and said to Shen Yi, "Give me my medicine."

Shen Yi was a gentle and refined nag; if his first profession was fighting wars, badgering others was his second. He responded with routine ease, "Marshal, any medicine is three parts poison. Unless it's a desperate situation, I advise you to avoid taking it as much as possible…"

Gu Yun stood expressionlessly beneath the light of the lamps, his eyes a bit vacant, and did not respond. Shen Yi closed his mouth—he remembered now that Gu Yun couldn't hear him at this distance. The man's deafness was a highly effective weapon against the long-winded, a killing blow that had never once failed him in all these years. Shen Yi could only quietly turn around and go to the kitchen to prepare his medicine.

As an assistive device, the glass monocle was a double-edged sword. It sat on the bridge of the nose and whenever there was a slight temperature change, the lens would fog up and obstruct one's line of sight. It was also exceedingly fragile and, should it crack or splinter, could easily damage the eyes. It was impractical for a military leader to use such a device in action, so Gu Yun could only wear it indoors in dire circumstances.

Once Shen Yi left the room, Gu Yun perched the glass monocle back on his nose. He ground out some ink, then picked up a brush and began to draft a memorial.

Although Magistrate Guo was only a minor official of the borderlands, his life was not at all destitute. The lamp on the table was no ordinary lamp, but rather a gas lamp that could be adjusted for brightness. Given the overly complex pattern decorating the edge, it might very well have been purchased from a foreign merchant. Beside the gas lamp, there was also a counterfeit Western clock. Though it was convincing for a counterfeit, close examination revealed that it was carefully inscribed with the decidedly Eastern ten heavenly stems and the twelve earthly branches[19] alongside the twelve divisions of the day. There was even a small window in the upper left-hand corner which displayed the ever-changing twenty-

four solar terms of the year. All in all, the contraption was something of a hodgepodge. Within the transparent base of the clock, gears large and small ticked forward in seamless harmony. Gu Yun hated this gadget because the moving gears made too much noise, and planned on sending for someone to come and take it away.

Granted, it didn't matter much right now, seeing as he couldn't hear anything either way.

By the time Shen Yi returned with a bowl of medicinal soup, Gu Yun had finished writing and set down his brush.

"Look this over for me and let me know if I've written anything inappropriate," Gu Yun said.

The gas lamp was dazzlingly bright, and the lampshade was embellished with a row of topless women of the western border, every one of them stroking their hair and posing coquettishly in unflinching detail. Shen Yi raised a hand to block out the light and muttered under his breath, "A disgrace to his station."

He skimmed through the draft of Gu Yun's memorial and sighed. "Anything inappropriate?" he said. "Please forgive my ignorance, sir, but I fail to see how anything you've written here could be considered appropriate."

"Huh? What was that?" Gu Yun said.

Words failed Shen Yi.

Pinching a corner of the letter between his fingers, Shen Yi shoved it back into Gu Yun's hands. He gently took hold of Gu Yun's elbow and pointed at a couch at the side of the room to indicate that he ought to make himself scarce. Then, he spread out a clean sheet of paper and dipped the brush in the ink to draft a new letter.

Gu Yun picked up the bowl of medicine and boldly emptied its contents in a single gulp. Without even removing his shoes, he leaned back against the exquisite fainting couch and swung one leg over the other, quietly waiting for the medicine to take effect. Gu Yun's hands were not idle. His quick fingers fluttered as he folded the rejected memorial into a paper swallow. With a flick of his hand, he sent it flying at the back of Shen Yi's head.

Honestly, this man was such a menace!

Hearing the gust of wind, Shen Yi turned and snatched the bird right out of the air. It was so absurd, he couldn't even be mad anymore. He asked Gu Yun, "Can you hear me when I speak like this?"

"Sort of. You sound a little muffled," Gu Yun said. "Anyway, everything I mean to say is in that draft. You can use it as an outline and help me phrase things more presentably."

Shen Yi sighed. "Sir, you want to tell the emperor that it was His Highness the Fourth Prince who saw through the plot orchestrated by the barbarian woman and her co-conspirators, and that it was only through his willingness to place justice above blood that your troops were able to seize victory and crush the barbarians in a single, decisive blow—would *you* believe such a story?"

Who knew what kind of magical elixir Gu Yun had imbibed, but the beauty marks at the corner of his eye and on his earlobe seemed to have come back to life and regained their deep red color.

"Well then, what do you suggest?" Gu Yun retorted. "Do you really think I should tell the emperor that I've been wanting to seize sole authority over Great Liang's military for ages? That immediately after the dust settled on the western front, I was chomping at the bit to go clean up military leadership on the northern border? That I've long awaited the opportunity to use protecting the little prince as an excuse to lay a trap for the barbarians? Or perhaps I should tell him I've been secretly partaking in the violet gold black market—which, by the way, has seen repeated prohibitions—and that in the course of my business there, I just happened to discover an unusually massive influx of violet gold in recent years?"

Shen Yi had no answer.

"You can fill out the details a little." Gu Yun continued unabashedly, "Make it believable. Otherwise, why else do I keep you around? Besides, since he's so unlucky as to have that woman for a mother, he's bound to suffer the harassment of those old bastards when he gets back to the capital. Make sure you add a few flourishes when you're done. Say that, despite the fourth prince's bleak life, his fierce devotion and sincere loyalty to his country is undiminished. Embellish his story, make him sound a little tragic. So long as we make the emperor cry, who will dare wag their tongue?"

Shen Yi didn’t know what to say. He’d only just finished comforting the prince at this man’s behest and now he wanted him to make the emperor cry.

He set down the brush with a grim smile. “Perhaps this humble servant hasn’t swallowed enough ink; I find myself unable to spit up the words needed for such a task. Please entrust this assignment to someone more qualified.”

“Ah!”

Shen Yi turned to look, only to find that bastard Gu resorting to the age-old ruse of inspiring pity via self-injury. He put on his act without an ounce of shame. “My head hurts—ow, ow, ow, it hurts so much it feels like it’s about to explode—Jiping-xiong, aside from you, there’s no one who can help me. How can you bear to betray me like this? This mortal existence is truly cold and ruthless. What point is there in living on?”

At that point, he clutched at his chest and collapsed onto the little couch stiff as a coffin board, playing dead. Why was he clutching at his chest when it was his head that hurt? A little line of veins burst cheerfully into being on the back of Shen Yi’s hand.

Nevertheless, after a while, Shen Yi had no choice but to sit back down, smooth out a sheet of paper, and deliberate over every word as he began to edit Gu Yun’s memorial to the emperor.

Gu Yun showed no sign of rising from the dead; he really did have a headache. Shen Yi knew this was the side effect of that magical elixir. After drinking a bowl of that medicinal soup, for a short period of time—enough, perhaps, to burn a stick of incense—his eyes and ears would become keen, and his entire body would feel relaxed. Yet once that time passed, he would be afflicted with a splitting headache, the world spinning before his eyes as his hearing faded in and out.

These effects would last for just under an hour before slowly receding. When they disappeared, his eyes and ears would function just like those of able-bodied people for a limited amount of time.

As for how long they would remain that way, it was difficult to say. The first time Gu Yun took this medicine, his head hurt so fiercely that he slammed it against his bedpost again and again. Afterwards, he’d been able

to see and hear clearly for over three months. He'd nearly forgotten that two of his senses were impaired. As he began using this medicine more frequently, however, two things happened: On the one hand, he mastered the supreme feat of falling asleep no matter how painful the headache. On the other, the medicine seemed to gradually lose its effect.

At present, a single dose could only provide him with three to five days of clarity. *Perhaps in a few years' time,* Shen Yi thought, *this medicine will no longer have any effect at all.*

The two of them—one sitting, one supine—fell silent. Only when the night grew dark and the sound of the night watch floated through the window did Shen Yi set down his brush. Turning around, he reached for a blanket and laid it over Gu Yun's body. Gu Yun was still in that same coffin-board-like position, motionless save for his furrowed brows. His lips and cheeks were bloodless, those two cinnabar beauty marks the only spots of unearthly, contrasting color in the lamplight.

Shen Yi glanced at him briefly before quietly taking his leave.

When Marshal Gu rose the next day, he was back to being that vigorous and lively beast, the Marquis of Anding.

The sky had yet to lighten when Shen Yi was rudely awakened by the early-rising Gu Yun banging on his door. Groggily undoing the latch, he was treated to the sight of Gu Yun gleefully announcing, "The item I ordered has finally arrived! Just you wait—I'll definitely cheer that little bastard right up when I go beg for forgiveness!"

Shen Yi blinked furiously, a slightly ominous feeling unfurling in his heart.

The Marquis of Anding ordered four soldiers of the Black Iron Battalion to carry a box longer than a roof beam, then swept out majestically to look for Chang Geng. As he passed the mint bush he had mauled the day before, he yanked off another leaf and stuffed it into his mouth, paying no mind to its sharp, serrated edges. With the leaf on his tongue, he began to whistle a jaunty little tune of his own making—an open proclamation of his venerated presence that could be heard from afar.

He’d scarcely stepped through the front gate of Chang Geng’s courtyard when he was greeted by the murderous swing of an oncoming sword. A servant boy who had been standing to the side about to serve the tea yelped in terror, the tray in his hands clattering to the ground and its contents—teacups, teapot, plates, and bowls—smashing to pieces. A palm-sized dagger shot out from Gu Yun’s sleeve, catching Chang Geng’s sword in midair as the man slid out from beneath the blade like a fish in water. The sword and dagger rasped lightly against each other with the resonant sound of metal striking stone. Then, with a light flick of Gu Yun’s crooked fingers, Chang Geng felt his wrist go numb. Nearly losing his grip on his sword, he had no choice but to withdraw.

Gu Yun slipped the dagger back into its home in his wrist guard. Then he clasped his hands behind his back and said with a smile, “Is there something bothering Your Highness so early in the morning? It’s all right. Please feel free to vent your frustrations on my body if it helps ease your anger.”

This Gu bastard may have thought he came to offer a humble apology, but no matter how one looked at him, he seemed to have come specifically to pick a fight.

# Chapter 14:
# Breaking the Ice

GE PANGXIAO HAD ORIGINALLY PLANNED to fawn over Chang Geng while he practiced the sword first thing in the morning. But before he could even begin to gush with praise, this unexpected incident occurred. He immediately transformed into a fuzzy little quail chick and cowered to the side in a stupefied daze, too scared to even breathe. It was still early in the morning, but Chang Geng didn't look like he'd slept well at all; his complexion was so pale it was tinged with green. The corner of his eye twitched slightly as he shot Gu Yun a penetrating glance. He slowly lowered the tip of his sword and said in a restrained voice, "It was my momentary lapse of control. Please excuse the indiscretion, my lord."

Gu Yun rubbed at his chin. No longer daring to smile, his expression turned stiff. He tentatively raised his hand, wanting to sling his arm over Chang Geng's shoulder as usual, only for Chang Geng to shy away.

"Please come in," Chang Geng said coldly.

Gu Yun awkwardly retracted his hand, bringing it to his mouth to cough dryly into his fist. "Chang Geng, wait."

Hearing his godfather call his name, Chang Geng instinctively halted his footsteps. He watched as Gu Yun turned around and waved a beckoning hand behind him. Soldiers entered in perfect unison, carrying a box between them. After setting the box inside the courtyard, they drew back and dropped to one knee in an orderly row.

"Sir."

Gu Yun lifted his palm upward, an indication for the soldiers to rise. Then, he stepped forward to personally pry open the lock on the box. The lock was overly complicated, and the way he pressed his hands over it was like teasing a child with a rattle-drum, deliberately mystifying. Turning back, he shot Chang Geng a smile. "Come here. Let me show you something good."

The lid of the box opened with a *click*. Ge Pangxiao tugged at Chang Geng. When he saw the other's lack of enthusiasm, he stepped forward with irrepressible curiosity to peer into the box first and cried out in surprise. A silver suit of heavy armor lay quietly inside the box. It was without a single blemish, and the lines of its body flowed so smoothly that its gleam nearly burned the eyes. It was terrifyingly beautiful. Compared to this suit, the heavy armor those barbarians had obtained from who knows where seemed like unwieldy lumps of iron.

"This is the armor I commissioned from the masters of the Lingshu Institute a while back," said Gu Yun, exceedingly pleased with himself. "Its violet gold fuel efficiency is twice that of other heavy armor of the same class. The joints have also been reinforced, so it won't get jammed by a single silk dart like those hulking pieces of junk the barbarians were wearing. It's a masterpiece, and far better than the armor I used back when I was younger. But it doesn't have a name yet… And, well, it's high time you received your given name. Maybe you can leave your milk name behind for this fellow."

Aside from being momentarily dazzled by the brilliant gleam of the heavy armor, Chang Geng's face remained absent of emotion. Upon hearing Gu Yun's suggestion to name the heavy armor "Chang Geng," his expression became all the more pointedly blank.

Since when did the name "Chang Geng" become so popular with the masses? Xiu-niang—or rather, Huge'er—and now Gu Yun; they all seemed to have a special fondness for this milk name of his.

In the moments before her death, the enemy whom he'd considered his mother named that poison capable of driving a person mad "Chang Geng." And now, just before dissolving into foam, the young godfather whom he'd wanted to spend his life caring for was gifting him an exquisite suit of heavy armor and, likewise, recommending he name it "Chang Geng."

Could there be a more ironic coincidence?

When all was said and done, the exceptionally gifted Marshal Gu had once again successfully and unknowingly jabbed someone in their sore spot.

Unease grew amongst the circle of onlookers at Chang Geng's prolonged silence. Ge Pangxiao shuffled over with tiny steps and tugged Chang Geng's sleeve. "Dage, why don't you try it on? The first time I ever saw a suit of heavy armor was that day with all those barbarians."

Chang Geng lowered his head. Without another word, he turned around and swept back into his room, slamming the door behind him. The smile curving Gu Yun's lips gradually turned bitter. He seemed a bit helpless, standing at the entrance of the courtyard, but quickly pulled himself together and navigated himself out of the awkward situation. "It's my first time being someone's godfather," he said self-deprecatingly. "I haven't gotten the knack of it yet, so I'm sorry you all had to witness such an embarrassing scene."

One of the Black Iron Battalion soldiers stepped forward. "Sir, about this armor…"

"You can put it over…uhh—why don't you put it in the outer room for now. You may give him the key later." Gu Yun paused. It seemed he wanted to say something else, but in the end, only uttered a deflated, "Forget it."

Casually dressed in a thin, unlined indigo robe, he didn't seem very sturdy at all. He'd put so much thought into getting into Chang Geng's good graces, only for his plan to blow up in his face. He stared at the closed door before him with an air of disquiet, looking rather pitiful.

Taking in the scene, Shen Yi couldn't help but curse him in his head. *That's what you get for being so arrogant! And now you've run into a wall and stubbed your toe. Serves you right!*

Even Ge Pangxiao felt a little bad for him. Scratching his head, he said, "Uncle Shiliu…"

Gu Yun stroked Ge Pangxiao's forehead and forced himself to smile. "It's fine. You guys go on and play by yourselves."

With that, he turned around and strode over to Shen Yi, dragging the man off into the distance. Only when they were out of earshot did he drop his voice and mutter, "He was pretty happy with the wrist cuff last time, wasn't he? Why isn't it working this time?"

Shen Yi glanced this way and that. Seeing that there was no one around, he didn't bother mincing words. "Sir, do you really think that people are as simple as wooden clubs? That the same tactic will work every single time?"

"Enough with the sarcasm," Gu Yun retorted, obviously agitated. "What should I do?"

Shen Yi rolled his eyes. "Look. You caused such a stir on the northern border after keeping him in the dark for so long. He's shown you nothing but sincere devotion, but what have you done in return? Right now, he thinks you've been pretending to be blind and deaf and lying to him about everything. Also, the mother who raised him since birth has turned out to be a northern barbarian spy. She's dead and for all he knows, you're the one who forced her to take her life…"

"Bullshit," Gu Yun cut him off. "That enchantress from the grasslands only killed herself so willingly because she was certain of their success. If she knew I was here, she would have realized their plan was doomed. If she thought they would fail, there's no way she would have offed herself."

Shen Yi mulled his words over but couldn't follow his reasoning. All he registered was the main point, namely, that Marshal Gu was the undisputed hero of this story—because what else was "if she knew I was here, she would have realized that their plan was doomed" supposed to mean?

This man truly was beyond saving.

Shen Yi had given him enough of his attention. "You ought to give him a few days of peace and quiet," he said perfunctorily. "Stop pestering him with tactics you use to butter up concubines and give him time to calm down on his own."

"I don't have any concubines," said Gu Yun.

"That's right," Shen Yi sneered, "You don't even have a wife."

Gu Yun kicked him.

Yet after taking a few steps, Marshal Gu was struck with a new realization—this current state of affairs was precisely what he wanted. It

just so happened that he was presently disinclined to return to the capital. However, with the little prince in his care, he couldn't afford to loiter around in Yanhui Town forever. As he turned these thoughts over in his head, a rotten idea began to take shape.

"This works out perfectly," Gu Yun said, turning to Shen Yi. "I haven't sent out the letter from last night yet. When you get back, edit it again and say that His Highness the Fourth Prince is extremely pure and filial. Although he was torn between his strong senses of loyalty and filial piety, in the end, he placed justice above family for the sake of the country and its people. Nevertheless, this left him so overcome with grief that he fell gravely ill. Tell them we will be staying in Yanhui Town for the time being and return to the capital once His Highness has fully recovered. Make sure it sounds fair and reasonable, with the goal of making the emperor cry."

Shen Yi stared at him. If he stood any chance of besting him in a fight, he would have loved to personally beat this Gu bastard until he cried.

Unfortunately for the bastard in question, the best-laid plans of men must bow to the plans of heaven.

The next day, while Gu Yun was perched atop a wall watching Chang Geng practice his sword, a Black Hawk arrived to deliver an urgent golden token. Gu Yun took a single glance, and his expression abruptly changed.

His Majesty the Emperor was critically ill and bid the Marquis of Anding bring the fourth prince back to the capital posthaste.

Gu Yun flipped down from where he had been sitting. Chang Geng vaguely heard him instruct someone beyond the wall, "Send Jiping to me. Begin preparing for our journey back to the capital immediately."

Stunned, Chang Geng set the tip of his sword on the ground and leaned his weight against it. He suddenly caught a whiff of the uncertainty of his future.

Aside from himself, the entirety of Great Liang believed he was the fourth prince.

Chang Geng had always found his natal horoscope to be terribly base—nothing like a child of royalty. If he really were a prince, then regardless of whether he was pure or a mixed breed, shouldn't his bloodline give him the same protection from ignoble fate afforded all descendants of the Son of Heaven?

How did he end up here?

At the end of the day, it wasn't up to him to decide whether he was truly a member of the imperial family or nothing more than a lowly pauper.

Watching Chang Geng's face, the ever-perceptive Ge Pangxiao immediately noticed his dark mood. He approached him with a smile. "Don't worry, Dage. From now on, I'll follow you no matter what. If you become a great general, then I'll be your personal guard. If you become a government official, then I'll be your attendant. If you become the emperor, then I'll be your eunu—mmph!"

Chang Geng clapped a hand over his mouth with a glare. "Should you be speaking such reckless nonsense? Do you *want* to die?"

Ge Pangxiao's little bean-like eyes darted this way and that. Unexpectedly, Chang Geng felt his frustrations ease slightly. Even the butcher family's little porker was taking things in stride—if he continued to be ruled by his anxieties, wouldn't he be utterly useless? *I might as well run away by myself,* Chang Geng thought. *It's not like I have any family left. If I disappeared to some forest deep in the mountains and became a hunter, no one would find me.*

But to run away, he would first have to cut ties with Shiliu—Gu Yun. Chang Geng tentatively imagined severing that connection, but the thought alone hurt so badly, he felt like his insides were being ripped out. At least for the time being, he was forced to shelve his plans.

In the end, Chang Geng found himself swept up by events, blindly following Gu Yun on the road back to the capital.

Ge Pangxiao had declared that he would follow him, and he did just that. The boy who had spent his entire childhood in the rural countryside stepped onto the long road leading to the capital, boldly electing to move up in the world. The tag-along even brought his own tag-along in a buy-one-

get-one-free deal. As the retinue was preparing to set out, Chang Geng spotted Cao Niangzi, who now looked for all the world like a crossdressing girl clad in boys' clothes. The youth was truly rendered speechless.

Cao Niangzi gathered up all his courage and said in a high, trilling voice, "Chang Geng-dage, you saved my life that day in the underground river. My dad told me a real man never forgets the good deeds of their benefactors. To repay this debt of gratitude, it is only proper that I devote myself to you, body and soul…"

Chang Geng got goosebumps from hearing the words "a real man," and upon hearing the words "devote myself body and soul," his stomach began to hurt. "There's really no need for you to devote yourself to me like that," he responded stiffly.

Cao Niangzi's ears were bright red. "I…" he began bashfully, "I want to follow you to the capital so I may attend to your needs."

Chang Geng wanted to reject him outright. But as the words reached the tip of his tongue, they inexplicably slipped back down his throat. His impression of Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi had always been that one was a tag-along while the other spoke scarcely a word in his presence. They could hardly be considered his friends. But once he left Yanhui Town, these two might become all that remained of his memories of the place—Shen Shiliu didn't count.

Chang Geng hesitated briefly. Then he turned to the guard Gu Yun had assigned to him for the trip and said, "Dage, if I could trouble you to consult the Marquis of Anding about this matter."

The guard returned in short order. "The marshal says the decision is up to you, Your Highness."

Chang Geng exhaled softly and thought to himself, *Sure enough, Gu Yun would never concern himself with such a trivial matter.*

Thus, with Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi in tow, Chang Geng mounted his horse and cast one last look back at Yanhui Town.

The giant kite once made its yearly return to port here. On those days, both sides of the river would fill with noise from the people lining the streets to welcome it back. Life here was simple and poor, but there were nevertheless quiet moments of joy. Now, though the fires of war had merely

singed it, the entire settlement seemed to have been cast into deep shadow. The town was quiet, the silence only broken here and there by the rise and fall of cawing crows.

Chang Geng had an indescribable premonition in his heart—he felt that those simple and happy days of yore would never return.

The elite contingent of Black Iron Battalion soldiers rushed back to the capital at a forced march. Even as a youth brimming with energy, Chang Geng was exhausted after a few days of travel.

They had set up camp within a valley that day. In his fitful sleep, Chang Geng managed to conjure up a brand-new nightmare. He dreamed that he stabbed Gu Yun in the chest with a steel knife, and that his blood sprayed high into the air. Gu Yun's face was pale as a sheet as his eyes dimmed and became unfocused. A thin line of blood trickled from the corner of his mouth. "Yifu!" Chang Geng shouted…and sat up in his bed in a panic. He instinctively pressed a hand over his chest, his entire head drenched in sweat.

Chang Geng had discovered that after being scalded by the violet gold, the silk dart he had smoothed down was covered in scrolling markings resembling auspicious clouds. He had bored a hole through the metal and hung it around his neck. This was the silk dart that helped him kill a barbarian warrior. Since Chang Geng had witnessed bloodshed, he believed he could no longer be considered a child and was qualified to be a man. Thus, he kept that bit of metal on his person at all times.

The fragment of black iron was ice-cold to the touch, and its cool metal surface gradually calmed Chang Geng's mind. He exhaled a slow, shaky breath and crawled out of his tent. The guard on night watch moved to follow him at once, but the youth waved him away. Chang Geng walked alone to the small river and washed his face. Hearing the delicate chirping of an insect in the underbrush, he reached out and easily captured a tiny, little late autumn cricket in the palm of his hand.

With the retreat of the summer heat came the imminent chill of autumn. This little creature's life was about to run its course. Thinking the cricket rather pitiful, Chang Geng loosened his hold and released it from

captivity. He strolled aimlessly along the riverbank until he inadvertently arrived at the commander’s tent, where Gu Yun was staying.

Returning to his senses, Chang Geng smiled in self-mockery and was about to turn back when he saw Shen Yi come rushing over with a porcelain bowl in his hands. A familiar medicinal fragrance wafted through the air.

Chang Geng’s nose twitched slightly. He found he could no longer walk away.

# Chapter 15:
# A Late-Night Conversation

IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT for Chang Geng to see Shen Shiliu and Gu Yun as the same person. Shen Shiliu was an uncultured wastrel from a border town. He spent his days lazing around and strolling about, was a terribly picky eater, and never did a speck of work. He was as solid and real as he was despicable. But Gu Yun was different. To most people, “Gu Yun” was less like a person and more like a three-headed, six-armed idol with magical powers.

In this vast country spanning thousands of kilometers, there was only one Gu Yun.

Chang Geng wasn’t the only one who felt this way. Whenever they stopped to think about it, Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi also felt like they were living in a dream. But Chang Geng was different from his two little friends. After all, Shen Shiliu wasn’t their godfather.

Chang Geng didn’t resent Gu Yun for deceiving him. He had been misled by falsehoods since birth and was long accustomed to it—what was one more lie? But this boy was rarely demonstrative with his affections. He’d given a small part to his neighbors in Yanhui Town and a small part to the perennially absent Company Commander Xu. As for what remained of his affection and concern,

he had entrusted it all to his young godfather. Now that Marshal Gu had swept in out of nowhere and erased his little yifu from existence, the greater part of his emotional attachments crashed to the ground and cracked open a bloody expanse in Chang Geng’s heart—and that stung.

Yet now, with his late-night medicine delivery, Shen Yi had caused the shadows of the diametrically opposed “Shen Shiliu” and “Gu Yun” to unexpectedly overlap.

Shen Yi exited the commander’s tent a short time later with the empty medicine bowl in hand. He addressed the guards on duty, “Stand watch here. Do not allow anyone to enter and disturb him.”

Chang Geng drew closer, as if possessed by some demon or deity.

After traveling together for so many days, of course Gu Yun's personal guard recognized him. But acting on Shen Yi's instructions, they braced themselves to step forward and bar his way. "Your Highness, the marshal is feeling slightly unwell today and has already taken his medicine and gone to bed. Please tell us if there's something you need; we will help you in his stead."

Back when they were next-door neighbors, Chang Geng didn't even have to knock when he came looking for his godfather. Now, he had to trouble a stranger just to see him. Chang Geng bowed his head despondently. "Dage…"

Terrified, the guard fell to his knees. "This subordinate doesn't dare accept such an address from Your Highness."

"That's not what I meant." Chang Geng hastily waved a hand and said helplessly, "When we were in Yanhui Town, I used to bring him his medicine sometimes. I just want to check on him. If it's really too much trouble then forget it, but I…"

Here, his voice faltered, unable to continue, and he could only offer a stiff smile. Chang Geng thought to himself that if he were turned away now, he would never come and invite such humiliation ever again.

At that moment, another personal guard standing to the side stepped over and whispered, "Didn't the marshal say there's no need to give notice if His Highness wanted to see him? Don't be such a numbskull."

Chang Geng's senses were keen, so of course he heard their exchange. Right then, he couldn't have said what he was feeling.

The scent of medicine had yet to disperse inside the commander's tent. The bed curtains were pulled open, and a figure lay in silence within their confines. Only when Chang Geng walked a little closer did he realize Gu Yun was awake.

Gu Yun seemed to have a headache—his fingers were pressed tightly against his temples and his brows were fiercely furrowed. To Chang Geng's surprise, he hadn't seemed to notice that someone had come in. Chang Geng cleared his throat from a few steps away and called out softly, "My lo __"

He'd barely spoken when Gu Yun flipped over and, in an instant, drew a sword from beneath the covers. Chang Geng didn't have time to blink before the frosty gleam of the sword's blade was pressed against his throat, the chill where it touched him creeping up his neck. The man holding the sword was like a vicious dragon startled from slumber.

Taken aback by his murderous aura, Chang Geng blurted out, "Shiliu!"

Gu Yun tilted his head minutely to the side. After what felt like an age, he finally narrowed his eyes and recognized Chang Geng. "My apologies," he said vaguely.

Stuffing the sword back under the covers, he ran his fingers gently over Chang Geng's neck. "Did I hurt you?"

Chang Geng's shock had only just begun to fade when a faint suspicion rose in his mind. *Could it be that he really can't see?* But in the next moment, he felt there was no way—how could the Marquis of Anding possibly be half-blind?

Gu Yun groped his way to his outer robe, draping it haphazardly over himself. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

He tried to stand up as he spoke but moved a bit too quickly. He swayed slightly, then sat back down. Gu Yun sucked in a deep breath and pressed one hand to his forehead while bracing himself against the side of the bed with the other.

"Don't move." Chang Geng reached out unthinkingly to steady him. After a moment's hesitation, he bent to lift Gu Yun's legs back onto the bed and tugged his blankets into place. He stood to the side in awkward silence for a while, racking his brains for something to say. In the end, he asked gracelessly, "What's wrong with you?"

The side effects of Gu Yun's medicine had just begun to kick in. He hadn't expected Chang Geng—who as far as he knew was still throwing a tantrum and would have nothing to do with him—to suddenly pay a visit. Now he could only endure the headache and the way his hearing oscillated from ear-splitting loudness to fuzzy obscurity. Intending to dismiss Chang Geng first, he smiled nonchalantly and said, "Just a consequence of being

enraged by a little ingrate who refuses to acknowledge me. Now, if I could please trouble Your Highness to fetch me a pot of wine."

He knew from past experience that drinking some wine would help ease his symptoms at a time like this.

Chang Geng frowned as he looked him over with suspicion. Gu Yun's head hurt so badly it felt like it was about to split open, so he made up a lie on the spot. "It's a medicinal wine Shen Yi made to treat migraines."

Completely lost already, Chang Geng easily fell for this deception. In a haze of confusion, he handed Gu Yun the small pot of wine set beside his suit of light armor. Gu Yun downed half its contents in a single gulp. Seeing that he was about to polish off the whole pot, Chang Geng hastily caught his wrist and confiscated the wine. "That's enough. Even if it's medicinal wine, you shouldn't be drinking like this."

The strong wine scorched a fiery trail down to Gu Yun's stomach. It felt as though all the blood in his body was about to boil over. Gu Yun exhaled. As expected, his vision was clearer. But perhaps he really had drunk the wine a little too quickly, because he could feel the alcohol going to his head.

Neither of the two spoke for a moment as they stared at each other in mild consternation. Unable to remain upright, Gu Yun leaned back against the headboard and lightly closed his eyes in a clear dismissal. Chang Geng also recognized that it was time he left—but for some reason, he felt rooted to the spot. Berating himself internally for worrying over nothing, he nevertheless reached out and started pressing against Gu Yun's acupoints. Even though he found himself pathetic, he couldn't seem to stop the kneading motions of his hands.

Gu Yun's forehead was freezing to the touch, but aside from slightly furrowing his brows when Chang Geng began his ministrations, he didn't protest the treatment and pliantly allowed Chang Geng to maneuver him however he pleased. Chang Geng continued until his hands began to tire, at which point he asked quietly, "Does that feel better?"

Blinking open his eyes, Gu Yun gazed at him pensively.

It's said that, just as the wise man is not always free from error, the fool may occasionally stumble across a brilliant idea. Once in a blue moon,

and with the aid of liquid courage, Gu Yun was indeed capable of speaking with compassion. As he gazed at Chang Geng, he was struck by a sudden flash of enlightenment and said, “Yifu will protect you even once we reach the capital. Don’t be afraid.”

Chang Geng jolted in surprise, his body trembling in the dim lamplight. Chang Geng was at a sensitive and precocious age. When he knew he had no one to rely on, he would grit his teeth and will himself to become a cool and collected adult. But faced with that tiny spark of warmth he so desperately yearned for, that pretense of strength shattered to pieces, revealing the soft childishness inside.

Gu Yun reached a hand out to him and said softly, “Yifu was wrong, okay?”

He had no idea how his words pierced this youth’s frozen and splintered soul. His intentions weren’t particularly sincere. Most of the time, Gu Yun didn’t believe he had done anything wrong. And even when he occasionally managed to locate his conscience, he didn’t necessarily know *what* he had done wrong. He was only using the gentle forbearance drawn out of him by the wine to extricate Chang Geng from the depths of his anxieties.

Chang Geng clutched Gu Yun’s hand as if he were clinging to a lifeline. Those shoulders he had held rigid for so many days crumpled as he nearly began to cry. He realized that this whole time, all he had been waiting for was this handful of words. As long as this person told him directly, “I was wrong. I won’t abandon you,” he would feel that although he had lost Xiu-niang, who abused him, and Company Commander Xu, whom he failed to see one last time, there was still some small measure of warmth left for him in this world.

In that case, he could forgive everything his young godfather did.

In the past and in the future.

Regardless of whether he was Shen Shiliu or Gu Yun.

Gu Yun’s eyelids grew heavy, so he leaned back against the headboard to rest. He murmured in a barely audible voice, “Chang Geng, a lot of things change. No one knows where they will end up at the very

beginning. You're still very young, so sometimes, it's better not to worry too much."

Chang Geng stared at his face without blinking, his eyes unwittingly shining with a trace of cautious hunger. He admitted sorrowfully to himself that Gu Yun was right—a lot of things did change. The living died, happy times faded, and beloved friends and family went their separate ways. Ties of affection as lofty as the mountains and as deep as the seas followed the currents, flowing to the ends of the earth… Only he knew that his ultimate end had already been decided—he was destined to become a madman.

Gu Yun scooted to one side of the bed and stretched out an arm to pat the space beside him. "Come on. We still have a long way to travel tomorrow. You can make do with this tonight."

And so, Chang Geng spent the latter half of the night asleep in Gu Yun's tent. As usual, the wu'ergu refused to spare him, plaguing him with one nightmare after another. Yet a light medicinal fragrance lingered in his nose. It penetrated deep into his subconsciousness, assuring him that he was safe and making him vaguely aware that he was dreaming, like a barrier between him and his fear and resentment.

For Chang Geng, this could be considered a rare instance of peaceful sleep.

Of course, it would have been even better had he not awoken to discover he had fallen asleep on the Marquis of Anding's arm, rendering it numb, or that he had spent the night constantly burrowing into the man's arms.

And it was made even worse by the fact that Gu Yun was the sort of bastard who was fundamentally incapable of empathizing with the boy's tender and volatile heart. The more embarrassed he felt, the more Gu Yun would go out of his way to pour salt on the wound. Marshal Gu was personally of the opinion that after sharing the same pillow for a night, the two of them were reconciled. Thus, he once again reverted to his old despicable ways. Not only did he spend the morning teasing the boy while kneading his own arm, he also hinted that he would be periodically beating this dead horse again in the interest of future mockery.

Chang Geng figured Gu Yun's weakness and acute distress the night before must have all been an act.

Shortly after dawn, Shen Yi looked on as Chang Geng dashed out of the commander's tent with an enraged flush on his face. The youth spent the rest of the day avoiding Gu Yun.

As they marched, Shen Yi guided his horse through their retinue and examined Gu Yun's complexion. He asked pointedly, "Everything all right?"

Gu Yun feigned ignorance and said, unperturbed, "He's just an ignorant little brat. It was hardly a problem to begin with."

Having witnessed firsthand the pathetic way Gu Yun had been scurrying about just days ago, Shen Yi could only sneer in response. As usual, Gu Yun acted like he couldn't hear him as he gazed at Chang Geng's figure in the distance. Suddenly, he said, "What do you think about me leaving the Black Iron Battalion in his hands?"

Shen Yi was stupefied. "Are you *trying* to ensure that he dies a horrible death?"

Gu Yun clicked his tongue, seemingly annoyed at him for raining on his parade.

"Don't tell me you seriously think the Black Iron Battalion is something good? Honestly, sorry if this upsets you, Zixi," Shen Yi said, "but back when the Black Iron Battalion was under the old marquis's command, it was considered a valuable tool of the nation. Now that you're leading it, it's become the nation's murder weapon. While valuable tools radiate light and are well-loved by the people, the same is not necessarily true of murder weapons."

Recognizing the unspoken meaning behind his words, the indolent smile on Gu Yun's face faded clean away.

# Chapter 16:
# A Tempestuous Situation

THIS COMPLEX WEB of relationships began with the late emperor.

The late emperor was a legendary figure who devoted his entire life to warfare and accomplished many great military and political feats. This venerable leader pushed Great Liang to the height of power, until it stood over the world like the sun in the sky at midday. No one on earth dared offend him. It was also he who established the Black Iron Battalion and Lingshu Institute. But regrettably, this wise emperor, who glowed with vitality, was destined to lose his family one after another. He wedded four empresses over the course of his reign, and not a one was blessed with longevity. He sired three sons and two daughters, and saw four of them to early graves.

At the time of his death, the only child the late emperor had left was his eldest daughter, who had married young.

According to legend, the eldest princess fell gravely ill when she was sixteen or seventeen and nearly perished. Luckily, she was already engaged to Gu Yun's father, the former Marquis of Anding. The abbot of the Temple of National Protection lit the everlasting altar lamps on the princess's behalf and advised that she marry immediately, hoping the fortuitous event would dispel the malign energies surrounding her and ward off her imminent death. Sure enough, after the wedding, the princess did indeed gradually recover from her illness.

In retrospect, it seemed as though the early deaths of all the little imperial princes and princesses were the karmic price exacted by the cosmos for the late emperor's great deeds.

Having spent his entire life burying his deceased wives and children, the emperor entrusted the Black Iron Battalion and the most essential military powers of the nation to his most beloved princess as he lay on his deathbed. However, Great Liang's patrilineal rules of succession could not be changed, and the next emperor could only be chosen from among the male descendants of collateral branches of the imperial family tree.

The fact that the Yuanhe Emperor could peacefully take the throne at the time of his succession was due in large part to the eldest princess's support.

The Yuanhe Emperor was very fond of the eldest princess and always referred to her respectfully as "Auntie." After she passed, he brought her only son Gu Yun to live in the imperial palace and took personal charge of his care. He bestowed upon him the courtesy name Zixi and was known to tell various civil and military officials on multiple occasions, "Zixi is like my brother." He also ordered the crown prince to treat this cousin of his with utmost respect and address him as his "imperial uncle."

Whether he called him uncle or aunt was of little importance, for they were all empty titles. What mattered in truth was that behind the young boy Gu Yun stood a significant portion of Great Liang's martial power, as well as the military authority vested in the Black Iron Tiger Tally passed down by the Marquis of Anding. With the old marquis's subordinates still in service, the Yuanhe Emperor would be sorely pressed to maintain the stability of his position should Gu Yun come to harm while under his care.

And so, while Gu Yun was young, the Yuanhe Emperor seized his chance and spent ten years chipping away at the power held by the subordinates of the former Marquis of Anding. Beset by such a devious means of attack, the Black Iron Battalion nearly splintered to pieces. The Yuanhe Emperor might have succeeded in this endeavor—but even the best-laid plans may be derailed by chance.

The invasion of foreign enemies threw the frontier of the Western Regions into crisis. The Yuanhe Emperor dispatched three commanders-in-chief in rapid succession, but each one was either too old or too incompetent. Accustomed to feigning peace and prosperity, the nation of Great Liang had turned its resources toward civil administration at the expense of national defense. Consequently, there was not a single man capable of providing military leadership in this time of need.

Thus, the Lingshu Institute, which had lain silent for many years, suddenly presented a memorial requesting that the Black Iron Battalion be reinstated.

And just like that, despite having one foot in the grave, the useless pile of scrap iron at which the emperor had spent ten years paring away

survived the onslaught and rose from the dead under Gu Yun's command.

Gu Yun's feelings toward the emperor were exceedingly complicated. On one hand, after the former marquis and the princess passed away, it was the emperor who had raised him to adulthood. It was the Yuanhe Emperor who gave him all the warmth that his parents never afforded him. His mother the princess was nothing like a staid married lady who spent her days hidden away at home. Rather, she was a sword-wielding, horseback-riding warrior who rushed headlong into battle. The fact that she had managed to survive long enough to make it to her wedding day despite her father's calamitous fate proved that she was a true heroine. Gu Yun never knew what it was like to have a warm and caring mother—instead, it was as though he had grown up with two fathers. He hadn't even learned to toddle steadily on his small legs before his unreliable parents toted him along to the battlefields on the northern border. There, he lived a harsh life and grew up on a diet of wind, dew, and sand. Whatever bits of soft pampering and refined sophistication he was exposed to in his life came entirely from the Yuanhe Emperor.

On the other hand, the Yuanhe Emperor had a weak temperament unsuited to a ruler. In his youth, this weakness was regarded as sentimental benevolence and righteousness, but as he grew older, it could only be considered muddle-headed incompetence. Rather than turning his mind to strengthening and revitalizing the vast expanse of the nation, the old man spent his days worrying about keeping his grip on the tiny piece of territory that was his imperial authority. When he wasn't using underhanded tactics to manipulate his officials into power struggles and evening out the political playing field, he was going out of his way to create trouble for Gu Yun and sowing disillusionment among the ranks of the military.

On one hand, there was his diligent love and care, while on the other, there was his diligent sabotage. Given the option of being caught between the two extremes of his "diligent" nature, Gu Yun would much rather spend his time eating sand on the border.

"The moon waxes only to wane,"[20] Shen Yi said meaningfully. "Doing too much is as bad as doing too little.[21] Sir, the ancients taught us that the greater one's achievements, the greater care one must take to avoid disturbing the heart of the sovereign. As things stand, you have thrashed

enemies on all four of the nation's borders—a clever person might think that your next step is an armed rebellion. Of course, you and I know you have no such intentions…but who knows what the emperor will think?"

"I was bestowed the title of Marquis of Anding—the Marquis of Order," Gu Yun said indifferently. "Therefore, it is my responsibility to fight for the sake of order in Great Liang. As for the rest, what concern is it of mine?"

Shen Yi shook his head and was about to respond when Gu Yun cut him off. "I know what you're trying to say, but there's no need."

Over their many years of partnership, they had developed the ability to communicate so much with eyes alone that their conversation was nonsensical to anyone who happened to overhear. Actually, the reason Shen Yi broached this subject wasn't because he wanted to discuss the current emperor with Gu Yun. Given the sovereign's age, chances were that his summoning Gu Yun back to the palace right now meant his time was near; there really wasn't much to say. Rather, Shen Yi was alluding quite obviously to the new, ascendent emperor.

Aside from Chang Geng, the long-lost child, the reigning emperor had two sons. The Crown Prince Li Feng had been well versed in the classics and the annals of history since childhood and had a steady temperament. Like his father, he preferred the pen to the sword and opposed large-scale expansion of the nation's armed forces. This prince believed that further military conquest would offend the heavens and harm the welfare of the common people. Conversely, it was the fiercely ambitious second prince, Prince Wei, who once openly declared his desire to expand the nation's borders and personally step onto the battlefield to strike down enemies of the state.

For military leaders such as themselves, there was hardly any need to say which of the two was more desirable.

Gu Yun's expression darkened slightly. Shen Yi knew he ought to leave it at that, but he couldn't help but say, "Sir, if you expressed your stance, even if it was just tacit approval…"

Gu Yun shot him a glance, his eyes like a pair of windslashers suffused with murderous intent. Shen Yi's heart stuttered in his chest, and his voice abruptly failed him.

“After we arrive at the capital,” Gu Yun said deliberately, with a palpable chill in his voice, “leave the three divisions on standby outside the nine city gates. Anyone attempting to fish in troubled waters while His Majesty is indisposed—no matter who they are—is to be executed on the spot. Have I made myself clear, Shen Jiping?”

Shen Yi’s complexion paled. After a long moment, he finally muttered, “…Yes, sir.”

The pair fell silent for a spell. Gradually, Gu Yun’s expression eased. Suddenly he said, “It’s not about you.”

Shen Yi smiled with difficulty.

“In the thirteenth year of Yuanhe, both the princess and the marquis had passed, and you had been sent back to the Shen family. Back then, my eyes and ears were already injured, and I could barely see or hear.” Gu Yun’s speech was low and unhurried. “It was snowing heavily that day and freezing cold. I’d taken the former marquis’s sword and hidden myself behind the door to my room, refusing to allow anyone to come near. It was the emperor who came in secret to my family’s courtyard with the third prince. The emperor—the magnificent sovereign of our nation—stood in the snow for nearly an hour before he finally managed to coax me out of my room. He traced words into the palm of my hand and even instructed his attendants to build a snowman for the third prince and me. The third prince…A-Yan…was younger than me by a year and as shy as a little girl. No matter how awfully I treated him, he was always smiling…”

At this point, Gu Yun’s voice hitched—the third prince had passed away at the tender age of nine.

“His Majesty is an uncommonly compassionate person,” Shen Yi said.

Unfortunately, it was impossible to be a good emperor with such an abundance of compassion.

Gu Yun allowed the thread of conversation to drop. Lifting his head, he gazed off into the middle distance. Chang Geng was seated on horseback, his head turned as he said something to Ge Pangxiao, who was riding in a carriage. Ge Pangxiao poked his adorably round little head out of the carriage window and laughed in response. As though sensing his gaze,

Chang Geng quickly glanced back, meeting Gu Yun's eyes. The youth's expression became uneasy, and he angrily jerked his face forward once again.

Gu Yun couldn't help but smile slightly as he said, "That little brat's the spitting image of his barbarian mother, but his personality is just like the emperor. Sometimes I get the feeling that, had A-Yan been able to grow up safe and sound, he'd be just like that boy."

Shen Yi closed his mouth. He could tell no matter what he said, it was useless.

Chang Geng couldn't hear Gu Yun's conversation with Shen Yi, but he had the nagging suspicion from the subtle smile on the man's face that he was mocking him again. It made him itch like a knife pressed against his back. After enduring the feeling for some time, he couldn't help but sneak another glance at Gu Yun—only to find that Gu Yun had guided his mount over in the interim. Chang Geng had no desire to speak to him and immediately squeezed his legs, spurring his horse into a gallop toward the head of their retinue. In his haste, he accidentally overshot and ended up near the prison wagon where the barbarian prince was being held.

The Tianlang crown prince's gaze could melt flesh, his hatred deeper than bone. Just looking at him made Chang Geng feel uneasy. He yanked on his reins, intending to put some distance between them…but at that moment, the barbarian prince's corrosive stare passed right over Chang Geng and landed on a figure behind him. His mouth cracked open in a grin. "Gu Yun, the hundreds of millions of dead souls of the Celestial Wolf Tribe are watching you."

His voice was like a piece of rust-flecked iron scraping across a porcelain plate—Chang Geng's whole body broke out in gooseflesh at the unsettling sound. The horse under him whinnied restlessly and began to pace back and forth in alarm.

"The lingering spirits of my people are watching you. Their buried, armored remains are all watching you. Ha ha ha ha… May the boundless mystical powers of the Eternal Sky bestow misfortune upon you and grant you the blessing of dying dismembered beneath the blades of my people before your soul is torn to shreds by the teeth of a hundred demons for tens of thousands of years without reprieve…" The barbarian prince's twisted

mien overlapped uncannily in Chang Geng's mind with the bloodstained corner of Xiu-niang's lips. A chill ran from the ends of Chang Geng's hair all the way to his toes, as though he had been plunged into an icy cavern.

Chang Geng let out a furious shout and made to draw the sword hanging at his waist, intending to swing the blade at the barbarian prince's head. But before he could fully draw the blade, it was shoved back into its scabbard by a careless hand.

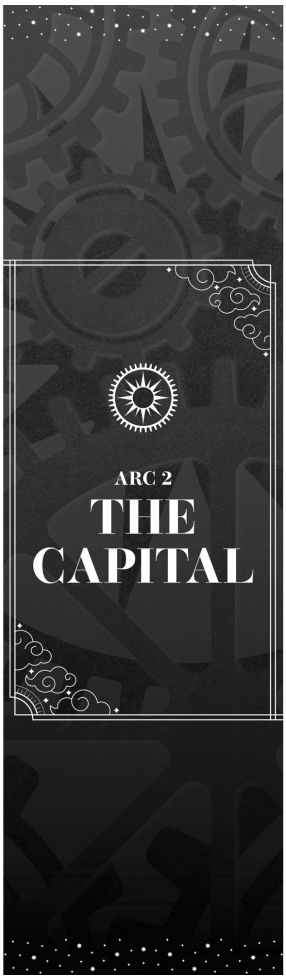
At some point, Gu Yun had wandered over to his side. He swept an impatient eye over the rambling barbarian prince. "Why don't you save those boundless mystical powers of yours and use them to bless your tribe so you can take over the world and live a long and fortunate life?"

As he spoke, he took hold of Chang Geng's reins and turned to glance at the white-faced youth. "What's wrong, Your Highness?" he said, smiling. "Don't tell me you believe him? Ay, these northern folk are pretty good at scaring little kids. In this, at least, they're a decade or so ahead of Great Liang. What's so fun about looking at prisoners? C'mon, Your Highness, let's go play over there."

"But he said you're going to…"

Gu Yun seemed not to care a whit and laughed uproariously, as though saying through his show of unbridled mirth, what fear have I of death?

Chang Geng continued to frown, feeling slightly vexed by this reaction. Yet, gradually, the lingering chill around him melted away at the sound of Gu Yun's carefree laughter. All of it really did seem suddenly ridiculous. For the first time, a tiny notion unfurled in Chang Geng's mind. *Why should I be scared?* he thought to himself seriously. *The wu'ergu may try to drive me mad, but that doesn't mean it will succeed.*


ARC 2
THE
CAPITAL

# Chapter 17:
# Death of an Emperor

OVER THE COURSE of their endless march back to the capital, the terror and confusion in Chang Geng's heart gradually settled as he rode amid that flurry of armor. He felt like a seedling that had fallen over sideways out of his pot—he could still straighten up and grow so long as he received a bit of sunlight.

The retinue arrived at the capital in the blink of an eye.

When the tallest gates of the imperial palace swung open, even the Black Hawks circling high above landed to prostrate themselves in deference. Gu Yun gripped the back of Chang Geng's head and said, "Don't think too much. Let's go greet your Imperial Father."

Dazed, Chang Geng allowed himself to be pushed and led inside. When he finally arrived at the sickbed, for a moment, he found it very difficult to reconcile the image of this withered old man with his idea of the emperor. He looked aged and weak, his hair and beard so grizzled they were like balls of dried-up silver thread. His wizened cheeks were wan and sallow, and his thin lips quivered slightly as he struggled to gaze up at Gu Yun.

Gu Yun's footsteps paused imperceptibly. Chang Geng's sharp ears heard him draw a subtle breath, but when he turned to look back, Gu Yun's face was as impassive as ever.

"Your Majesty, your humble servant has successfully completed his mission," Gu Yun said. "I have found and brought the fourth prince back to the capital."

Chang Geng flinched slightly in surprise as the Yuanhe Emperor turned his sluggish gaze toward him. He wanted to shrink back. It felt as if the eyes of the man lying on the imperial dragon bed contained a long hook that could reach into Chang Geng and pull out the past—as if he wasn't actually seeing him, but seeing someone else through him. Gu Yun gave

him a quick push from behind, so he had no choice but to take a few steps forward.

“Kneel,” Gu Yun murmured into his ear.

As Chang Geng kneeled politely, he was surprised to see two lines of tears roll down like twin rivers from the Yuanhe Emperor’s dried up, turbid eyes. They slid along the wrinkles lining the sides of his face like pus oozing from his sockets.

“Go on and greet your father,” Gu Yun urged.

Chang Geng couldn’t do it. During their journey to the capital, everyone he met snuck glances at him. He was drowning in a sea of scrutiny, but he still couldn’t see how he resembled the man lying on the dragon bed. He heard Gu Yun whisper softly into his ear, “Even if you don’t believe it to be true, greet him just this once.”

Chang Geng turned and met his young godfather’s gaze. His eyes were so clear they appeared cold, and they were completely dry—he didn’t even bother to fake tears. They seemed at once beautiful and heartless. That heartless man sighed and said quietly, “Please.”

No matter how much Chang Geng wanted to resist, and regardless of how unacceptable he found his present circumstances, he relented upon hearing these words. *Even if I’m a fraud*, he thought, *I can think of this as offering him a bit of comfort.*

The youth lowered his eyes and blurted out a perfunctory and somewhat insincere, “Father.”

The Yuanhe Emperor’s eyes brightened at once. It was as though he had gathered the last of his vitality into a bright ball of light that exploded across the sky like a brilliant display of fireworks. He stared at Chang Geng’s face greedily for a long time, examining his features in detail, before saying in a voice as feeble as a thread of gossamer, “We… We bestow upon you the name Min. Our son, may you shine bright and clear as the majestic skies, and live a long and peaceful life free from worry… Do you have a milk name?”

“Yes,” he said, “my name is Chang Geng.”

The Yuanhe Emperor's mouth twitched slightly, and his breath rattled in his throat as his voice momentarily failed him. Gu Yun stepped forward and helped the old emperor sit up. He patted his sovereign lightly on the back until he coughed up a mouthful of phlegm. The Yuanhe Emperor's eyes rolled back in his skull as he choked on his spittle, his body shaking and panting for breath. With a fitful groan of pain, he collapsed back onto the bed. He grabbed Gu Yun's hand with his emaciated chicken's claw.

"I'm here, Your Majesty," said Gu Yun.

The Yuanhe Emperor said with a voice like a broken bellows, "His… older brothers are all full-grown. Our little Chang Geng… We're afraid… he's the only one we won't see to adulthood…"

Gu Yun seemed to sense something. He met the emperor's aged eyes, streaked with tears, with his own youthful gaze, unmoved by emotion. They exchanged only a brief look, yet seemed to immediately arrive at a tacit and mutual understanding.

"I understand," Gu Yun said.

"We are entrusting this child to you, Zixi. There is no one else we can trust, aside from you. You must help us take care of him…" The Yuanhe Emperor's voice faded away as he spoke. "We also must give him a title of nobility… Where did you find him?"

"Yanhui Town on the northern border," said Gu Yun.

"Yanhui…" The Yuanhe Emperor repeated quietly. "We have never been there before. It must be very far away. In that case… We—we issue an imperial edict to confer the title of Prince Yanbei upon the fourth prince, Li Min. However… *cough cough*…the conferral ceremony will not be immediate. It will have to wait until he has come of age…"

Gu Yun listened in silence. In Great Liang, it was customary for monosyllabic titles to be conferred upon princes of the first rank. The second prince, for instance, was granted the title of Prince Wei. By comparison, disyllabic titles were given to second-rank princes of commanderies. Such titles were typically reserved for more distant members of the imperial family and indicated a slightly lower status.

"We are not trying to wrong him," the Yuanhe Emperor said, "but there's no other way to protect him. We do not wish to sow acrimony

amongst his older brothers… Zixi, you understand why we insist he receive his title only once he comes of age, don't you?"

Gu Yun stilled for a moment, then nodded. Chang Geng, who could not follow the riddles in which they spoke, felt his heart begin to hammer violently in his chest as an inexplicable sense of foreboding settled over him.

"We intend," the Yuanhe Emperor continued, "to issue an imperial decree to have you adopt Chang Geng for the time being… It's not usually done this way, but we have no one else we can trust with this, and thus we have no choice but to violate the ceremonial etiquette established by our ancestors… We want him to…be permitted to rely on you without any rank or title hanging over him for a few years. Zixi, you must take good care of him. Don't scorn him even if you have your own children in the future. He's already over ten years old, so it's not like he'll bother you all that long anyway. Once he reaches adulthood, you may send him to establish his own estate. When the time comes, follow all standard procedures as befitting a commandery prince… We have already selected a location…"

At this point, the Yuanhe Emperor choked on a breath and began to cough violently. Gu Yun reached out to help him, but the old emperor waved him aside.

The more the old emperor gazed at Chang Geng, taking in his pallid complexion, the more heartbroken he felt. Why couldn't such a good child stay by his side? Why was it that, when he had finally found the boy and brought him back after all these years, he had so little time left to spend with him?

The Yuanhe Emperor's gaze darted away from Chang Geng in a panic, as if he were a cowardly little boy in an old man's body. He turned to Gu Yun and said, "You must be tired after such a long journey. Let the child go rest. We have a few more words we wish to say to you."

Gu Yun led Chang Geng out the door and handed him over to an imperial attendant. Before taking his leave of him, he said softly into Chang Geng's ear, "Go get some rest. I'll come fetch you later."

Chang Geng followed the imperial attendant away in silence.
He couldn't seem to put his feelings into words.

This time, he had officially become Gu Yun's ward. It should have been cause for celebration, but somehow, he didn't feel happy at all. But the emperor had spoken, so there was no room for him to refuse, protest, or even say an extraneous word.

Despite his reservations, Chang Geng followed the imperial attendant's bowed head and small, shuffling gait away from that palace that reeked of medicine and death. After taking a few steps, he couldn't help but look over his shoulder at Gu Yun, catching sight of him turning back toward the emperor's room. The young Marquis of Anding had a profile straight out of a painting, and with the heavy, loose-fitting court robes wrapped around his body, he appeared inexplicably more restrained. Seeing him like this, a touch of bitterness rose in Chang Geng's heart.

*What are you thinking?* Chang Geng asked himself with a sardonic smile, *Only a few days ago you were still just the son of a border town company commander with an abusive mother who fed you poison. Now, you've become the ward of the Marquis of Anding himself. It's better than anything you could have possibly dreamed.*

In the face of these monumental events, Chang Geng was utterly helpless. The thirteen-year-old youth mocked himself as he strode down the long, dimly lit corridor of the imperial palace. The entire walk was eighty-one steps in all—he would never forget it as long as he lived.

The bedroom door closed quietly behind Gu Yun. The incense burner sitting at the head of the bed emitted faint tendrils of pale smoke.

As Gu Yun kneeled by the head of the bed, the Yuanhe Emperor spoke. "We remember when you were younger, you got along with A-Yan best. You two were close in age, and when you stood next to each other, you looked like a pair of jade dolls."

At the mention of the third prince who had passed away too soon, Gu Yun's expression finally shifted. "I was terribly naughty as a child, not nearly as smart and sensible as His Highness."

"You weren't naughty." The Yuanhe Emperor paused, then repeated himself, "You weren't naughty… If only A-Yan had been a little more like you, perhaps he wouldn't have died so young. Just as dragons beget dragons

and phoenixes beget phoenixes, a particular kind of seed grows into a particular kind of tree. The blood flowing through your veins, Zixi, is the iron blood of the late emperor…"

"Your Majesty," Gu Yun said hastily, "I don't dare accept such words."

The Yuanhe Emperor waved a hand. "There are no outsiders here, so we will speak frankly. Zixi, you were born to break new ground and expand the nation. Even a pack of wolves would cower in fear and bow their heads in submission at the sight of you. But I worry your deeds have weighed you down with malevolent energy, and in the future, you will answer to karma."

It was commonly held that the murderous crimes committed by Gu Yun's maternal grandfather—the former Emperor Wu—were to blame for the miserable state of his later years, in which he watched his children die one after another.

"I know Prince Wei is ambitious, but with you keeping watch over the crown prince, he will have no problems holding onto power. It is you I worry about… Please listen to us when we say that doing too much is as bad as doing too little. Remember to appreciate your good fortune and know when it's appropriate to advance, and when to retreat… In a way, the old abbot of the National Temple watched you grow up as well. The teachings of the Buddha are boundless—if you have time, you should pay him a visit."

The old bald donkey of the Temple of National Protection had a crow's beak for a mouth, always spitting out inauspicious remarks. He once proclaimed Gu Yun's natal horoscope afflicted by the heavy influence of fell stars, warning that his destiny was fatally adversarial to his closest kin. Since then, Gu Yun refused to take a single step inside the National Temple. At the emperor's mention of the abbot, Gu Yun thought, *That's right, I forgot about that old bald donkey. Someday when I have the chance, I'll be sure to settle matters with him and burn down that rotten fraud of a temple.*

His animosity wasn't entirely born of pettiness. After the passing of the former marquis, the emperor had used the same argument that "the sins of war will result in misfortune" to weaken the Black Iron Battalion. However, in recent years, foreigners frequently crossed the oceans in great vessels known as dragons and traveled to Great Liang. The northern border,

the Western Regions, even far across the East Sea—greedy eyes stared covetously at the Divine Land from every direction.

Murderous crimes would result in misfortune, but the collapse of the nation, foreign occupation, the displacement of common people, and floating corpses littered over thousands of kilometers—*that* was considered valuing peace and harmony, a sign that all was well in the world? If Marshal Gu of the Black Iron Battalion was as sentimental as this distant cousin of his on the throne, then who would the unknowing common people of this nation count on to protect their homes?

Would they send the Hanlin academicians of the imperial court to win over their enemies with their scholarly virtues?

In all honesty, Gu Yun did not only want to wage war on their enemies—he wanted to vanquish them once and for all. Ideally, he would first flatten the Western Regions before bringing the fight all the way to the doorstep of those Far Westerners forever lusting after the Central Plains. He would strike such terror into their hearts that they would never again turn their covetous eyes on another's beloved motherland.

Back when he had been sent to pacify the Western Regions, Gu Yun had submitted a memorial laying out these requests. But the emperor thought he had gone mad and rejected his proposal outright. And as if a flat rejection wasn't enough, he'd used such a wild goose chase as "find and bring back the fourth prince" to send Gu Yun running off to the northern border.

…And now the little brat had helped him snatch up a barbarian crown prince.

Some people were born under stars of carnage. If they did not become great generals who fought to expand the territory of their country, then they were certain to bring disaster upon the nation and its people.

The compassionate emperor with one foot in the grave and the dispassionate general in the prime of his life, one lying sick while the other stood tall, had a final heart-to-heart in the narrow space at the head of the imperial dragon bed. In the end, neither could win over the other.

The Yuanhe Emperor gazed into Gu Yun's cold eyes and felt a sudden wave of sadness. If he hadn't coveted imperial power all those years ago,

the old emperor thought to himself, would he now be nothing more than an idle prince who spent his days indulging in cockfighting and dog-racing? He would never have met the woman of his destiny, and might have promised his most heartfelt affections to another instead. He would have led a life of noble luxury and would never have been torn from his family for so many years.

Perhaps only cold-hearted and decisive individuals like the Marquis of Order had the right to sit on an imperial throne built on withered bones and covered in thorns.

“Zixi… Oh Zixi…” the Yuanhe Emperor muttered.

Gu Yun’s face, which seemed cast from iron, finally revealed a ripple of emotion. He lowered his lashes slightly and relaxed his taut shoulders, his posture no longer so indifferently ramrod straight.

“Will you bear a grudge against us?” the Yuanhe Emperor asked.

“I wouldn’t dare,” said Gu Yun.

“Then will you miss us after we’re gone?” the Yuanhe Emperor pressed.

Gu Yun closed his mouth.

The old emperor stared at him relentlessly. “Why aren’t you answering?”

After a moment of silence, Gu Yun said plainly and without much sorrow, “After Your Majesty passes, I will no longer have any family left in the world.”

The Yuanhe Emperor felt as though there were a hand squeezing his chest. In all his life, he had never heard this little bastard say a gentle word. Now, with this utterance, he cleared all the unspoken debts of gratitude, grudges, love, and hatred between them with the single stroke of a brush. Only lonely and faded attachments were left behind to fill the brief time that remained.

At that moment, an imperial attendant standing by the door hesitantly spoke up. “Your Majesty, it’s time for your medicine.”

Gu Yun returned to his senses and, with a lift of his head, transformed into that arrogant lethal weapon in human form once more. “Please take

care of yourself, Your Majesty. Now, if you would please excuse me, I will take my leave."

But right then, the Yuanhe Emperor called out his milk name. "Xiao-Shiliu!"

Gu Yun went still.

The Yuanhe Emperor reached laboriously under his pillow and pulled out an antiquated string of Buddhist wooden prayer beads. "Come, give us your hand."

Gu Yun looked on as the old man, gasping for breath, slid those cheap-looking prayer beads onto his wrist. He felt a bit conflicted.

"Your older cousin…is watching over you," The Yuanhe Emperor's voice was barely audible as he patted him on the back of the hand.

A wave of intense grief welled up in Gu Yun's heart. He could not control his expression any longer, and so could only hastily excuse himself.

The emperor passed three days later.

As in times past, all the civil and military officials, and all the common people, bid farewell to another era.

# Chapter 18:
# The Marquis Estate

AFTER DAYS OF HEAVY RAIN, the expectant chill that had settled over the capital finally gained ascendency, releasing the biting cold that would soon freeze dew into frost.

Chang Geng joined a crowd of strangers and sent off the old emperor in a confused daze. The day of the funeral procession, eight horse-drawn carriages pulled a casket engraved with nine imperial dragons. The grand avenue was lined with a hundred thousand unmanned steam-powered horns. They moaned out a dirge while spewing a canopy of white mist that enshrouded the entire capital city. Contingents of soldiers in heavy armor formed a blockade barring unauthorized persons from entry, and beyond them stood a vast crowd of funeral attendees. Citizens of Great Liang mingled with Eastern foreigners, Baiyue folk, northern barbarians…even numerous foreigners from the Far West.

Countless pairs of eyes openly and secretly appraised Chang Geng—the Fourth Prince Li Min—whose life history remained a mystery. Yet none of them dared step forth and speak to him in full view of the Marquis of Order.

Fearless of consequences, Marshal Gu had brazenly hidden Chang Geng away from public view. After so many days, aside from the crown prince and Prince Wei, both of whom had stopped by to sound him out, Chang Geng hadn’t come into contact with a single outsider.

After the dust had settled, Chang Geng had been escorted back to the Marquis of Anding’s estate.

From the outside, the Marquis Estate was truly awe-inspiring. The towering main gate was adorned with a pair of ferocious beast heads that breathed white steam through their mouths and nostrils. Thirty-six interlocking gears turned in concert as the heavy bolts securing the doors lifted with a creak to reveal a pair of giant iron puppets flanking the interior of the gate. Two black-iron suits of warrior armor hung from the stone spirit screen blocking the entrance, while the estate’s human guards stood in the

dim light of the gas lamps on either side, assailing visitors with a threatening and austere aura.

Of course, anyone who stepped into the residence itself would find that the main gate was the only awe-inspiring part of the Marquis of Anding's estate. Although the residence's courtyards were deep and spacious, the greenery inside was sparse. The front doors were terrifically imposing, but within, there were only a handful of taciturn old servants who paused to give their salutations to Gu Yun but never said much of anything else.

Most puppets and engines utilized by common people burned coal, and only a very small handful—typically colossal machines such as a large-scale dam or a land-clearing puppet, which belonged to local government officials—burned violet gold. As for those expensive little gadgets that ran exclusively on violet gold, only members of high nobility above a certain rank were entitled to their use.

Rules were rules, but whether they were followed was a different matter altogether. For instance, Magistrate Guo of Yanhui Town's rank wasn't nearly high enough for such things, yet he had multiple violet-gold-powered devices in his home. Conversely, although Marshal Gu's rank was more than lofty enough, his estate was unexpectedly meager in its simplicity. Aside from a handful of iron puppets, there were few other implements that relied on violet gold.

The most valuable objects in the entire estate were probably the decorative horizontal plaques personally inscribed by the greatest scholar of their time, Lin Mosen. Mosen-xiansheng happened to be the young Marquis of Anding's very first teacher, so in all likelihood, these tablets had been given free of charge.

Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi followed Chang Geng and moved into the estate as well. Ignorant of the wider world, the three village kids peered around in eager curiosity. With the fearless honesty of a child, Ge Pangxiao called, "Uncle Shiliu…"

Cao Niangzi chided him at once under his breath, "It's *my lord*!"

"Heh heh, my lord." Ge Pangxiao was all smiles as he drew closer and asked, "Your house doesn't seem as fancy as Magistrate Guo's."

“How can I possibly compare to Magistrate Guo?” Gu Yun said with an unconcerned smile. “Remote places are far from the eyes of the emperor, so of course he’s filthy rich, unlike me. To save a little money, I even head to the palace on the holidays just to eat for free.”

It was clearly meant as a joke, but listening from the side, Chang Geng vaguely sensed some hidden meaning in his words. Before he could dwell on it any further, however, Cao Niangzi once again began muttering to Ge Pangxiao. “Didn’t the plays at the local theater always say young lords of noble families all have swings in their gardens and beautiful servant girls?”

Acting as though he were highly knowledgeable on the subject, Ge Pangxiao puffed out his belly and said, “The gardens are in the back. Also, in rich families, girls aren’t allowed to appear in public whether they’re master or servant. Do you really think you’d be allowed to gawk at them however you please? If you don’t even understand that much, then don’t ask.”

“There are no servant girls in my house,” said Gu Yun, smiling. “All I have are a bunch of geezers and old maids. To be honest with you, the most beautiful person in the estate is probably yours truly. If you want to look at something pretty, you can look at me.”

He threw them a coquettish wink and laughed brightly, showing off a mouth full of perfect white teeth.

Cao Niangzi bashfully looked away. Ge Pangxiao didn’t expect the high and mighty Marquis of Order to be just as shameless as “Shen Shiliu,” and was likewise struck dumb. Gu Yun clasped his hands behind his back and fiddled with the old prayer beads the late emperor had given him as he strolled through the desolate courtyard. “My mom passed early, and I haven’t taken a wife yet. I’m a full-fledged bachelor in the prime of my life—what do I need a beautiful servant girl for? It’d be dreadfully inappropriate.”

When he put it like that, it made it seem like he was some sort of proper gentleman.

Cao Niangzi didn’t dare look directly at Gu Yun—he didn’t really have the guts to look at beautiful men in general—and asked shyly from

where he stood to the side, “My lord, they say the gates of nobility are as deep as the sea…”[22]

Gu Yun couldn’t help but laugh as he teased, “What’s this? You’re going to bid farewell to your beloved and marry me instead? Is that how the poem goes?”

Cao Niangzi’s entire face glowed so red, he resembled the buttocks of a scrawny monkey. Meanwhile, Chang Geng’s expression had darkened considerably. “Yifu.”

Only then did Gu Yun recall his nominal position as their elder. He hastily schooled his face into solemnity and scraped together a shoddy display of paternal benevolence as he said, “There aren’t really any house rules here. Tell the kitchens if there’s anything particular you want to eat. Otherwise, there’s a study and an armory in the rear courtyard. There’s also a stable. Feel free to study, practice martial arts, or go horseback riding as you please. Shen Yi usually comes by when he’s free, but if he’s busy, I can hire another tutor for you. And there’s no need to tell me if you want to go out and play. Just make sure you bring along some guards and try not to make trouble for me… Uhh, let me think if there’s anything else you need to know.”

After muttering to himself for a while, Gu Yun picked up where he left off. “Oh, that’s right. The only other thing is, some of the house servants are getting along in years, so they might be a little slow to respond. Please try to be understanding and patient with them.”

His instructions were simple and not at all unusual, yet Chang Geng felt his heart soften at the rare hint of warmth in his words—even though it wasn’t directed at him. Gu Yun patted him on the back. “I know that it’s a little dreary here, but from now on, you can consider this place your home.”

For a long time after that, Chang Geng didn’t see Gu Yun at all. The new emperor was about to ascend the throne, so Prince Wei needed to be warded off. The captured barbarian prince from the northern border needed to be dealt with, and an explanation needed to be demanded from the northern tribes for breaking the terms of their treaty and invading Great Liang without provocation…as well as countless other social obligations,

preliminary investigations, and so on and so forth, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Chang Geng had always thought himself very diligent, but by the time he woke up every morning, Gu Yun had already left. Likewise, when he started awake deep in the night, Gu Yun had yet to return.

The muggy summer had ended in the blink of an eye, and, after a hasty autumn, it was time to light the furnaces for winter.

Late at night, a fine layer of snow covered the flagstone roads of the capital, like a pale lid drawing shut over a dark eye. A light fog rose over the city. The dignified ring of horses' hooves echoed from the end of a narrow lane, and a short while later, a carriage drawn by a pair of solid black horses passed through the mist and stopped before the rear gate of the Marquis Estate.

There was a soft popping sound as the three warming cylinders lining the body of the carriage discharged clouds of white steam. The interlocking gears on the door turned quietly before swinging outward to allow Shen Yi to climb down first.

Exhaling a cloudy white breath, Shen Yi turned back and addressed the figure still inside, "You may as well stay put. Have someone open the gate and drive the carriage right in. It's way too cold out."

A sound of assent came from the man in the carriage. It was, of course, Gu Yun. His face was lined with exhaustion, but his mind was still alert. "Open the gate," he instructed the coachman.

The coachman promptly jogged over to do his bidding. Stamping his feet in the cold, Shen Yi asked, "Have the side effects faded?"

"They have." Gu Yun dragged his syllables out lazily as he spoke. "Slaughtering another Jialai Yinghuo or two should be no problem at all."

Since he had raised the topic, Shen Yi asked, "What did His Majesty say when he summoned you to the palace? I heard that the Tianlang Tribe sent an envoy?"

"That lame old man presented a shameless memorial to His Majesty —he nearly wiped his snot on it, he sniveled so much. Anyway, he swore to increase annual tributes of violet gold by ten percent and begged His

Majesty to consider that his son was young and ignorant, and to spare his life. The old cripple was willing to take his place as prisoner and accept punishment in his stead.” Gu Yun was in a poor mood, so his words were less than charitable. “That son of a bitch already has seven or eight brats under his belt—how exactly is he ‘young and ignorant’? Or could it be that there’s no good soil north of the border, so their sprouts are slower to mature?”

Shen Yi frowned. “You didn’t throw a fit in the middle of the imperial court, did you?”

“As if I have such an outsized temper! But if I didn’t throw a fit, that poverty-stricken Minister of Revenue would agree on the spot,” Gu Yun said frostily. His tone changed as he sighed, “The court’s full of wise sages, yet none of them seem to understand the consequences of allowing a tiger to return to the mountains.”

When the barbarians invaded Yanhui Town, they had outfitted their heavy armor with miniature cannons set into their chest plates—a typically Far Western design. People of the Central Plains had naturally slighter builds, so their heavy armor designs prioritized lightness and speed. They generally didn’t mess around with such pointless feats of inhuman strength while on the battlefield.

There was no doubt that the interests backing Jialai Yinghuo were those Westerners salivating over Great Liang.

Gu Yun looked down at the softly glimmering layer of snow and said lowly, “There are vicious tigers and wolves beyond all four borders.”

He had half a mind to set sail westward on a dragon warship of his own and bring the fight all the way back to the foreigners’ lair. But after so many years of military campaigning, the national treasury of Great Liang had been depleted by his battles. As things stood now, Gu Yun had helped the new emperor ascend the throne by offering his timely assistance in subduing Prince Wei, who sought to use the late emperor’s illness to cause trouble. He had performed a meritorious deed, so the new emperor was willing to afford him a modicum of regard on any and all issues.

However…would that regard stand the test of time?

Shen Yi shook his head. “Let’s not discuss this any further. How is His Highness doing at your estate?”

“His Highness?” Gu Yun blinked in surprise. “He’s doing pretty well.”

“What has he been doing every day?” Shen Yi asked.

Gu Yun thought for a moment, then answered uncertainly, “…He’s probably been playing? Though I heard from Uncle Wang that he doesn’t go out very much.”

Hearing this report, Shen Yi knew Marshal Gu had been treating the fourth prince like a sheep put out to pasture—that was to say, aside from feeding him some grass every day, he didn’t bother with anything else. He could hardly be blamed for this. After all, this was precisely how the old marquis and princess had raised Gu Yun himself.

Sighing, Shen Yi asked, “Have you forgotten how the late emperor treated you when you were young?”

A hint of awkwardness flickered across Gu Yun’s face. In all honesty, he had yet to figure out how he should interact with Chang Geng. The boy was already past the age where a child would act cute with adults and beg for treats. Plus, he was precocious by nature—back in Yanhui Town, the child had done more caring for his unreliable godfather than the other way around.

Gu Yun couldn’t spend his days playing with a bunch of kids, but it was also difficult for him to act like their elder and provide Chang Geng with proper guidance. The fact was, Gu Yun had been forced into a position that was entirely beyond his capabilities. He was simply not at an age where he was qualified to be a father.

“What are you planning to do about the little prince?” Shen Yi asked once again.

Even though Gu Yun said before that he wanted to hand the Black Iron Battalion over to Chang Geng, he had only been speaking in jest. They were both aware that it was impossible. What’s more, Gu Yun knew very well the level of hardship one must endure to accomplish anything worthwhile in the military. So long as he still breathed and could bear the

weight of Great Liang on his own shoulders, he didn't really wish for Chang Geng to endure similar hardships.

Yet at the same time, he also wished to see the little prince who had been placed in his care accomplish great feats. At the very least, he wanted him to be capable of protecting himself.

How can one accomplish great feats without enduring hardship?

All parents since time immemorial have struggled to answer this question to no avail—never mind Gu Yun, the under-qualified godfather. Thus, he could only allow Chang Geng to grow freely on his own.

The coachman had already opened the gate and lit the lamps, and now stood at the side, awaiting Gu Yun's next set of orders.

"I suppose it would be too much to expect you to fuss over him," Shen Yi said to Gu Yun, "but he's just experienced a huge upheaval in his life. You're the only family he has left, so try to treat him with sincerity. Even if you don't know what to do, just show up every now and then, and write out some notes for him to copy—that would be good too."

This time, Gu Yun finally seemed to take his words to heart. Curbing his temper, he made a noise of assent.

Shen Yi unhitched one of the horses from the carriage and took its reins in hand. He had already mounted and led the horse a few paces away when he couldn't help but turn back and get in a few more words. "Sir, regardless of whether it's an ignorant child or a sickly old man, they all have things they can teach you. No matter who you meet, it is always a fortuitous encounter."

Gu Yun pinched at the space between his brows in consternation. "Fucking hell, you're such a wifeless nag. Seriously, fuck off!"

Laughing, Shen Yi cursed him one last time before speeding away on horseback.

# Chapter 19:
# Secrets

BY NOW it was already past midnight. Utterly spent, Gu Yun had originally planned to return to his room and fall into bed. But affected by Shen Yi's words, he found his footsteps leading him unwittingly toward the rear courtyard.

There were barely any lights still lit in the capital. Chang Geng had already gone to sleep. Gu Yun padded past the old servant standing by in the outer chamber and stepped quietly into the boy's room. Standing in the light reflecting off the snow outside the window, he was about to smooth Chang Geng's blanket into place when he realized the child's sleep was not particularly peaceful. The boy was in the throes of a nightmare.

*Is it because he's not used to living here?* Gu Yun wondered as he pressed his ice-cold fingers to Chang Geng's wrist.

Chang Geng jerked violently and bolted awake with a gasp. The terror in his eyes had yet to fade as he stared dazedly at the man sitting beside his bed.

Gently swinging his wrist from side to side, Gu Yun softened his voice and asked, "You had a nightmare? What was it about?"

At first, Chang Geng didn't respond. Finally, his disoriented gaze gathered focus, his eyes like twin flames burning in the night as he stared at Gu Yun. Without warning, he reached out and hugged Gu Yun around the waist.

Gu Yun's shoulders were clad in black iron pauldrons that exuded the chill of early winter. With his forehead pressed tightly against the freezing metal, Chang Geng felt in his hazy, half-awake state that he had traversed back to that bone-chilling snowy night beyond the border. Shivering violently, he dragged himself free of the nightmare that had been holding him captive. *I'm still alive*, he thought.

The clock sitting on the desk ticked along softly. The brazier set up in the middle of the room was like a giant cauldron emanating fine tendrils of

white smoke, which were immediately sucked away by a custom-made bellows. Only the lingering heat was left behind to circulate through the air and warm the room.

Gu Yun was initially rather shocked to be on the receiving end of such an embrace, but soon an odd feeling came over him. This was the first time someone had ever depended on him so completely. For a moment, he felt as though the two of them were all the other had in the world. Gu Yun had a clear understanding of his own capabilities—the arrogant veneer of invincibility that he donned every day was merely a façade. But at this moment, he really was under the illusion that he could do anything.

Chang Geng had already begun to shoot up in height, but his frame had yet to fill out and was still frail like a child's. When Gu Yun gathered him in his arms, he could feel the outline of the youth's ribs through his thin inner robe. As that weak body of flesh and bone pressed against him, solid and full of life, Gu Yun thought he absolutely must care for this child and—just as the late emperor hoped—watch him grow up and live a long and peaceful life.

He could finally make up for his inability to help A-Yan all those years ago.

Gu Yun removed his pauldrons and hung them to the side before joining Chang Geng on the bed, fully clothed. He asked, "Is it because you miss your mother? I mean your aunt."

Chang Geng shook his head.

Gu Yun doubted that Chang Geng had any deep feelings of attachment for the late emperor—in all likelihood, the only reason he had called him "father" at all was out of deference to Gu Yun. Thus, he asked, "Then, do you miss Xu-xiong?"

This time Chang Geng didn't deny it.

Company Commander Xu had been the first decent person he had met in many years. While he hadn't been particularly capable, he had been gentle and magnanimous. His stepfather had led by example and shown Chang Geng that it was possible for a person to live with such quiet serenity. It was a pity that Company Commander Xu had always been very

busy and rarely came home. His absence was the only reason Gu Yun had the opportunity to fill that tiny little gap in Chang Geng's life.

At Chang Geng's tacit admission, Gu Yun tilted his head back and stared up into the shadowy canopy of the bed curtains. Feeling a little dismayed, he blurted out, "Did Xu-xiong treat you better than I do?"

Chang Geng looked at him, flabbergasted. He honestly had no idea how the man could ask such an obvious question. Miraculously, this time Gu Yun understood his expression at once. He felt a chilly breeze sweep through his heart and said stiffly, "Well, it can't be helped. An order from the emperor cannot be disobeyed, so you'll just have to make do."

Chang Geng's expression shifted to one of resignation.

Gu Yun began to laugh. Chang Geng could feel his chest shaking gently. A peculiar feeling settled over him—the left side of his body, uncomfortable with such intimacy, wanted to pull away, while the right side wished desperately to transform into a sheet of paper so that he could plaster himself more tightly to Gu Yun's form. Caught in the indecision of whether to draw back or draw closer, he felt like he was about to be torn in two.

While he struggled between reason and temptation, Gu Yun's misbehaving hands were once again up to no good. Chang Geng's unbound hair was spread out behind him and fell into Gu Yun's hands, and he unconsciously began to twirl the long strands around his fingers. His motions were gentle and only tugged lightly against Chang Geng's scalp. Chang Geng quivered and broke out into gooseflesh. All the blood in his body rushed so quickly he seemed to hear it surging through his veins. A mysterious wave of heat spread through his limbs, nearly scorching through his skin from within.

Chang Geng sat up, jerking his hair out of Gu Yun's grasp and flying into an embarrassed fury. "Stop messing around!"

Gu Yun had been dogged by illness and misfortune when he was young. He had also hit his growth spurt late; when he was twelve or thirteen years old, he still looked like a child. So he didn't see Chang Geng as an adult at all, and failed to notice anything was wrong. Completely unconcerned, he withdrew his mischievous claws and pillowed his arms behind his head. "I haven't gotten married," he said, "so naturally, I have no

children. I don’t have any siblings either. It can’t be helped if my hospitality leaves much to be desired. There are a lot of things that might not occur to me if you don’t tell me, so if I’ve wronged you somehow, just tell me. Don’t keep it all tucked away in your heart, okay?”

His voice was deep and pleasant. Perhaps it was a consequence of his extreme exhaustion, but there was also a subtle haziness to its timbre as it slid into Chang Geng’s ears unchallenged. A chill crept up Chang Geng’s spine, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

Nervous, yet perplexed at his own nerves, Chang Geng thought to himself, *We’re just chatting casually. Why am I reacting like I’m confronting a powerful enemy?*

“I would be grateful if Your Highness could be a bit more forgiving as well,” Gu Yun said with a smile. He patted the space beside himself on the bed. “Come lie down. Tell me what you were dreaming about just now.”

It was only at the mention of his dreams that the wildfire raging inside Chang Geng’s body subsided. He stared at Gu Yun for a while, forcing down the urge to tell him everything about the wu’ergu. He asked tentatively, “Shiliu, is there a poison in this world that can cause a person to go mad?”

Gu Yun rolled his eyes in displeasure. “Just who exactly are you calling Shiliu?”

Despite the rebuke, he wasn’t really all that fussed. After a moment’s pause, Gu Yun said, “I’m sure there is. The world is a vast place full of extraordinary things. There are many medicinal herbs in foreign lands that have never been seen in the Central Plains. Add to that all the various gods and deities passed down from generation to generation, and there are plenty of secret intrigues out there that we don’t understand.”

Chang Geng clutched tightly at the broken dart hanging around his neck. His heart sank.

A bit baffled, Gu Yun asked him in return, “Why are you asking me something like this?”

The tips of Chang Geng’s fingers turned cold as ice. In that instant, a clear winner emerged in his internal war between reason and impulse. “It’s nothing,” he said glumly. “I dreamed I turned into a lunatic and killed a

bunch of people.” He scrambled to continue before Gu Yun could offer his assessment, “Dreams are always the opposite of reality, I know.”

In the end, he resolved to keep the wu’ergu firmly under wraps. Chang Geng was a youth full of determination; he refused to admit the possibility that he might lose. He would remain sober and calm, and resist the wu’ergu until the bitter end. But even with his heart galvanized with so much courage, he still didn’t dare probe too deeply into what Gu Yun’s feelings on the matter might be should he ever find out.

Chang Geng thought that his young godfather might not rebuff him even if his head grew scabies and his feet became covered in sores—but what if he found out that Chang Geng would one day turn into an unhinged madman? He instinctively shied away from the thought, reluctant to examine it any further. Instead he asked, “Do you get nightmares too?”

Gu Yun promptly shot off his mouth. “Of course not.”

But the moment the words left his lips, Gu Yun remembered Shen Yi telling him to treat Chang Geng with sincerity. Perhaps he had gone a touch overboard. He hastily cleared his throat and tried to set things to rights. “Uhh…I mean… Sometimes when I fall asleep in an awkward position, I’ll have weird dreams.”

“What do you dream of?” Chang Geng asked.

Gu Yun disliked talking about his feelings. He always found it to be incredibly awkward saying such things aloud—like stripping naked and then going streaking in the streets—so he side-stepped the question and said, “Just random nonsense. I never remember them when I wake up. Anyway, you should hurry up and go to sleep. It’s going to be morning soon.”

Chang Geng fell silent, but a moment later, when Gu Yun turned to glance at him, he found the boy’s eyes wide open and staring straight at him. Gu Yun was finally beginning to realize what a headache this boy was to handle.

“Fine,” Gu Yun sighed and began to rack his brains trying to remember. Speaking in a lilting voice used to coax children to sleep, he said, “When I was young, there was a time I dreamed I was locked inside a pitch-dark room. I couldn’t hear a single sound, but somehow, I knew there

were man-eating beasts in there, so I kept on running—It might have been because I didn't stretch out my legs when I fell asleep. People say if you keep your legs curled up, it's impossible to run fast in your dreams. In the end, after running for so long, I felt like my legs had turned to cotton. The more frantic I became, the harder it was to keep going."

"And then what happened?" Chang Geng pressed.

And then he had been scared awake, of course—what else could have possibly happened?

But there was no way Gu Yun would ever admit to being scared awake. He began to paint a vivid picture of nonsense and said, "And then, I got tired of running away, so I somehow pulled out a giant broadsword inlaid with gold filigree, stabbed the wild beasts that were chasing me to death, and woke up feeling perfectly satisfied."

Chang Geng was speechless.

He actually, genuinely thought he'd been about to hear Gu Yun speak seriously for once. He really was too credulous.

Who could predict that after all that bullshit, Gu Yun would once again assume a serious expression and say, "Do you know what you should do if you get nightmares?"

After a moment's hesitation, Chang Geng once again trusted him too easily and, after a serious shake of his head, awaited his enlightening remarks.

Affecting an air of utmost importance, Gu Yun said, "The reason you get nightmares is because there are little night demons haunting your room and messing with you. These night demons despise filth, so in the future, remember to leave a chamber pot outside your door. I guarantee it'll drive them all away."

Chang Geng stared at him.

The boy was the gullible type who was easy to lead on. Gu Yun had very quickly discovered the fun in teasing him and, despite the late hour, felt much more energized after cackling at his expense.

Chang Geng had naively thought that his young godfather had come to check on him. But now, he realized the only reason for this blockhead's

visit was to make fun of him! He turned over angrily, facing away from Gu Yun with the words *fuck off* writ large on his back.

But Gu Yun didn't fuck off. He watched Chang Geng until his breathing slowly evened out. Only then did he gently tuck the blanket around him and rise to leave. Gu Yun had intended to collect the pauldrons he had removed on his way out. But as he reached for the armor, he suddenly remembered hearing someone say that the reason children were prone to interrupted sleep was because they lacked yang energy and therefore attracted the attention of foul beings. Leaving ironware beside their beds could ward off such entities. Gu Yun never put much stock in such hogwash folk beliefs before, but now, he wondered if there wasn't some merit to them. Why else would they have been passed down for so many years?

With this in mind, he left the iron pauldrons behind and departed from Chang Geng's bedroom clad in only an unlined robe.

Perhaps Marshal Gu really was a ferocious man capable of warding off evil spirits, for Chang Geng's second bout of sleep was completely free of the demons and monsters that usually haunted his dreams. He slumbered on until the skies brightened into a hazy dawn.

But unfortunately, when Chang Geng woke up, his expression was even gloomier than it would have been had he lain awake all night.

He sat ashen-faced in bed for a short while. Then, lifting his blanket, he glanced down at himself and couldn't help but let out a long, sobbing sigh as he curled himself into a ball and clutched at his head.

This was the second time.

Chang Geng could no longer lie to himself. This time, in his dream, he had truly and unreservedly been…he had truly and unreservedly been defiling his young godfather.

The youth buried his face in his blanket and let loose a muffled howl, so disgusted and ashamed of himself he felt he could never show his face in public ever again. He wished he could smash his head against his headboard and die right there. This time, not even the broken dart with the auspicious cloud patterns could soothe him.

Just when the youth's mind had tangled itself completely into a confused ball of twine, there came a knock at the door.

Wallowing in the depths of his depression, Chang Geng was so startled, his seven mortal forms nearly abandoned his immortal souls and leapt out of his body. His first reaction was to frantically ball up his bed sheets. Then, gritting his teeth, he forced himself to calm down and walked over on unsteady legs to open the door.

How could he know that the moment he opened the door, he would be greeted with yet another unwelcome surprise.

# Chapter 20:
# Instruction

AN IRON GIANT the size of a full-grown man stood before Chang Geng's door. It wore a black iron helmet beneath which he spotted a pair of small, pea-sized eyes glowing with dark purple light—a unique characteristic of burning violet gold. It made for an extremely terrifying sight, a figure that would have been more than qualified to play the main character of any late-night ghost story. Staring straight ahead, the iron fellow reached sluggishly over the top of Chang Geng's head and, with a great claw the size of a bowl, knocked at his door like a woodpecker, relentless in its mission.

Chang Geng's immortal souls and mortal forms were still fluttering about in midair, giving a live enactment of a spiritual prison break. He hadn't even had time to clear his head before he registered the scene before him, and the nerves that had been stretched to breaking the entire night before drew taut once more. Gasping in fright, he took a few hasty steps back and grabbed his sword from where it hung by the door.

It was at that moment that Gu Yun popped out from behind the iron giant. Beaming with enthusiasm, he asked, "Cool, isn't it?"

Chang Geng didn't know what to say. Like hell it was cool!

"I know none of the house guards dare to spar with you using actual weapons. Uncle Wang told me you practice with your sword by yourself every day in the courtyard, but if you don't have anyone to exchange blows with, it must be awfully boring." As Gu Yun spoke, he poked around at the back of the iron fellow's neck. The beast obediently stilled in response, standing vacantly in place. Gu Yun patted it on its enormous iron head and said to Chang Geng with a smile, "So I've brought you a sword-training puppet to play with. What do you think?"

Plagued by a guilty conscience over the secret he harbored in his heart, Chang Geng didn't dare allow his eyes to linger on Gu Yun for too long. He tilted his head back to examine the iron beast that stood

immovable as a mountain. After a cursory inspection, he pointed to himself in stupefaction. “Me? Play with this thing?”

Wouldn’t it end up being the other way around?

Gu Yun pushed the iron puppet into Chang Geng’s little courtyard as the youth followed listlessly behind. Although he’d managed to maintain a veneer of calm, he was only brave enough to sneak peeks at Gu Yun when his back was turned. After stealing several furtive glances at the man, Chang Geng discovered a problem—Gu Yun was dressed very lightly today.

On this early winter morning, the air was already cold enough to transmute exhaled breaths into frost, yet all Gu Yun had on was a gently worn double-layered robe. When he bent down to adjust the iron puppet, his waist looked even more slender than Chang Geng imagined.

Terribly embarrassed, Chang Geng turned away and asked, “You’re not going out today?”

“Mm, it’s my day off,” Gu Yun responded.

Chang Geng fell silent for some moments, but in the end couldn’t help but ask, “Aren’t you cold dressed like that?”

“Stop nagging. Don’t be like Shen Yi. Now, get over here.” Gu Yun beckoned him closer and pulled the iron puppet upright. Patting it on its rock-hard shoulder, he explained, “This particular type of iron puppet is different from the ordinary models you see guarding people’s houses. This one is also known as a sword-training puppet, and it’s the first instructor for many children of noble families in the capital when they begin learning swordsmanship—I used it when I was younger too. It can execute several basic sword maneuvers and has seven acupoints in the head, neck, chest, stomach, shoulder, arm, and leg. If you strike any of the first four points, the puppet will stop moving immediately. However, if you hit one of the latter three points, you must be careful, because even if, for example, you strike the acupoints in its shoulder and arm, it can still sweep you off your feet with its legs. If you want to lock it down, you must strike one of the points in either the shoulder or arm, plus the point in the leg. What do you think? Want to try it out?”

Gu Yun’s explanation was shorter than the duration of a fart, over in just a few words. He swiftly segued into the simple yet violent practice

portion of the day’s lesson. “Pick up your sword.”

He hadn’t even finished speaking before the iron puppet lurched into action. Eyes agleam with purple light, it lunged forward, raised its sword overhead, and slashed downward.

Chang Geng had been out of sorts to begin with and hadn’t even drawn his sword. He frantically backed up several steps, but the iron puppet didn’t allow him time to catch his breath. The moment the puppet activated, it began chasing after and attacking him, and in no time at all, it had boxed him into a walled-off corner of the yard.

With nowhere to escape, Chang Geng could only grit his teeth, take his sword in both hands, and swing his weapon up. The two iron blades met with a clang. Chang Geng’s wrist jolted painfully as he lost his grip and dropped his sword to the ground. His body had just begun to warm up, but now it again broke out in a cold sweat. Moving on instinct, he snapped his head up—only to see the iron puppet’s sword freeze a mere hand’s breadth from his brow.

Cold light glanced harshly off the blade. The tiny courtyard was silent save for Chang Geng’s heavy panting and the iron puppet’s rumbling.

Gu Yun uttered not a single word of praise or condemnation, nor did he step forward to provide guidance. Instead, he sat down at the stone table in the courtyard, produced a small cup, freed the pot of wine from where it was tied at his waist, and proceeded to treat Chang Geng, who was presently being chased all over by the iron puppet, as a spot of entertainment to go with his drink.

Catching sight of this pompous asshole out of the corner of his eye, Chang Geng felt even worse. On one hand, he was like a little peachick, barely fledged, who had already valiantly puffed up his feathers in determination to show Gu Yun who was boss; on the other, he was afflicted with such a wealth of frustrations that simply looking at Gu Yun made him feel dizzy.

While the youth’s fighting spirit oscillated between firing up and dying down, the iron puppet had no such considerations. White steam erupted from beneath its feet as it indifferently slid several meters away and assumed a starting position, its sword once again angled at Chang Geng.

Setting his sword against his shoulder, Chang Geng stepped forward. He wracked his brain trying to remember how Gu Yun had used that small dagger to repel his sword back at the Yanhui magistrate's residence.

Gu Yun clicked his tongue and shook his head as he fiddled with the tiny wine cup in his hand.

The boy and the puppet's iron blades rasped against each other, sparks flying in all directions. Just as before, Chang Geng felt an overwhelming pressure bearing down on the hilt of his sword. Before he could follow through with his strike, he had already exhausted all his strength. The heavy blade once again flew from his hands and landed a meter away.

The sword-training puppet was designed as a sparring partner and would do no harm to its users. The purple light in its eyes flickered several times. Then the puppet withdrew the sword it held suspended over Chang Geng's head and slid back into a new starting position. Chang Geng's temples were soaked with sweat. He couldn't help but sneak another glance at Gu Yun as he thought in irritation, *Is he planning on sitting there all day? What's there to see?!*

Gu Yun watched Chang Geng's sword go flying time and time again as he polished off his pot of chilled wine. He crossed his legs left over right, then right over left, then back again, the perfect image of composure. It was only when a particularly hard strike from the iron puppet sent Chang Geng's whole body flying that he rose unhurriedly to his feet.

Chang Geng had broken skin from colliding with the ground. The wound stung, and when he touched it, his hand came away stained with blood. Before he could wipe it off, Gu Yun walked over to his side and stared up at the towering iron puppet with arms crossed.

Chang Geng hung his head, feeling so frustrated he couldn't bear to look at him.

"Your mind is agitated, so your footwork is unstable," Gu Yun said. "No matter how powerful the sword technique, if your legs lack stability, then you'll be like a river without a source or a tree without roots—you'll have no foundation on which to build your attack."

A vague understanding came to Chang Geng as he sought to grasp a little of what Gu Yun was saying.

Gu Yun was uncharacteristically serious as he said, “Get up. I’ll teach you.”

Chang Geng started in surprise, his eyes going huge. Before he could respond, Gu Yun had already dragged him to his feet, pulled him into a loose embrace from behind, and taken hold of his sword arm. Chang Geng struggled to swallow a mouthful of saliva as his back drew taut.

“Relax,” Gu Yun said in a low voice. “Don’t look at me, look at your sword.”

The words were barely out of his mouth when the iron puppet’s eyes blazed to life and it rushed forward once again, its abdomen rumbling like a distant war drum. As before, it attacked Chang Geng directly, with a downward slash aimed straight at his head. Even though there was a wildness coiled deep within his blood, it had thus far only reared its head in life-or-death situations when the boy was enraged. This, on the other hand, was merely a practice session.

Chang Geng didn’t have the wherewithal to dwell on the discomfort he felt over their intimate position. As before, his first instinct was to back away—a reaction most anyone would have when faced with the terrifying pressure exuded by such a colossal machine.

But Gu Yun didn’t allow him to retreat. Chang Geng felt like his entire body had been lifted into the air by Gu Yun, as though he were a fearless marionette lunging toward the iron puppet. His wrist, trapped in Gu Yun’s vice-like grip, thrust his blade forward without his conscious control. In that brief moment of close-quarters combat, Chang Geng felt Gu Yun twist his sword hand at a subtle angle. Suddenly the iron puppet’s weapon was deflected upward, tip angled toward the sky.

Cold iron brushed past him, nearly slicing through the hair at his temples. Chang Geng instinctively closed his eyes, thinking he was about to knock directly into the blade.

Gu Yun sighed to himself. *This child is a bit lacking in valor. Perhaps he isn’t cut out to hold a sword after all.*

The scent of frigid metal swept past Chang Geng's nose as the iron puppet's arm jammed slightly. Gu Yun kicked at the back of Chang Geng's knee and said sharply, "Open your eyes—strike the arm!"

Chang Geng's knee buckled as his leg shot outwards from the force of Gu Yun's kick, his foot landing precisely on the acupoint located on the iron puppet's arm. There was a *clunk* as the puppet's upper arm locked into place. Chang Geng had only just sighed in relief when Gu Yun pressed a hand against his waist, forcing him to bend down. A gust of wind blasted past his ear as the iron puppet's leg whirred over his head.

"Watch carefully now," said Gu Yun.

He tightened his grip on Chang Geng's wrist and pulled the boy along as he slid over the ground in a quick semicircle, the tip of the sword slicing precisely over the iron puppet's ankle. There was another *clunk* as the iron puppet locked down completely.

It stood quietly in place on a single leg. Then the purple light in its eyes flickered a few times before gradually fading away.

Palms covered in sweat and chest heaving with exertion, Chang Geng didn't even notice when Gu Yun's hands fell away. In that moment, he felt the yawning gulf of difference between his young godfather and himself.

Gu Yun, calm and unruffled amid chaos, dusted off his clothes and said, "It's human nature to cower away in fear. There's no harm in retreating if you're fighting a person, but if you're unarmored and fighting an iron puppet or someone in heavy armor, you must not retreat under any circumstances. These iron fellows' legs are powered by violet gold. They'll catch up to you the second you start running, and while you run, your mind and body are focused on getting away, which makes it difficult to quickly think up a counterattack. You'll just get flustered and end up getting caught by your enemy instead."

Chang Geng mulled his words over for a long while. Then he asked, "So Yifu is saying that if I encounter a much stronger opponent, my chances of winning are higher if I step forward and engage than if I run away?"

Arching an eyebrow, Gu Yun said with an air of slight bafflement, "Oh? So I'm 'Yifu' today?"

Everything about Chang Geng was good—with the sole exception of his tendency to impudently call him “Shiliu,” which was rather annoying. Gu Yun was born on the sixteenth day of the first month. His milk name “Shiliu” had been given to him by the princess. Aside from her and the late emperor, no one—not even the former marquis—addressed him as such. Although it was a minor thing, it felt weird hearing this little brat say *Shiliu* this and *Shiliu* that all the time.

In Gu Yun’s experience, there were two types of situations where he could get this little rascal to call him “Yifu.” The first was like a blind cat stumbling across a dead mouse—that is, when he accidentally managed to make the kid happy. The second was more like a blind cat stomping on the tail of a dog—that is, when he accidentally pissed the kid off.

Chang Geng peered at him closely for a while. Then he said with a mysteriously conflicted expression on his face, “I was being immature before. I won’t act like that again in the future.”

He had finally been forced to acknowledge this side of himself—shameful and despicable, immoral and incapable. How could he possibly continue being so willful? Sometimes, all it took was a single night for a young man to go from thinking that he was grown up to actually growing up.

Even the careless and sloppy Gu Yun felt that, somehow, Chang Geng had changed.

ARC 3
ON
WATCH

# Chapter 21:
# New Year's Eve

THE MARQUIS OF ANDING couldn't just laze around at home all day. The busy day of a Great Liang government official began at dawn, when they rose for morning roll call. Court ended at three in the afternoon, but even then, Gu Yun couldn't leave. The marquis rarely returned to the capital, so not only was he required to respond to the emperor's recurrent summons, he also had to fend off the many officials flocking to curry his favor. His calendar was packed with social obligations, and on his rare breaks, he toured the Northern Camp. He seldom came home before the sun set.

If Chang Geng wanted to receive Marshal Gu's personal guidance, he'd have to catch him while he was getting his morning exercise before going to court.

Chang Geng began to rise at three and crawl into bed at midnight. So early in the morning that the chickens were still napping, he'd lead his sword training puppet to Gu Yun's courtyard and wait. The youth walked ahead, carrying his sword, and the training puppet rattled along behind him, iron arms extended straight out in front. With an oil lamp hanging from its left arm and a boxed meal hanging from its right, it looked for all the world like a night-wandering spirit making a meal delivery.

When he arrived at Marshal Gu's courtyard, the early-rising servants would collect the food from the puppet's box and warm it gently while Gu Yun gave his godson a morning lesson. Thus, the meal-delivering night-wandering spirit would become a punching-bag night-wandering spirit, living a miserable life of hard labor.

After a lesson of a rather bold and imaginative nature, the food would be heated through. They would eat together, then go off on their own business—Gu Yun went to court, and Chang Geng waited for his tutor to collect him for lessons. In the afternoon, he learned martial arts from the estate's guards.

Gu Yun wasn't cut out for teaching. He had the same problem as Shen Yi, barreling wherever his train of thought took him. Half the time, by the time he finished setting up the iron puppet in the morning, he'd already discussed how to organize heavy armor formations, what proportion of heavy and light armor was most efficient for violet gold expenditure, or even the differences between Western Regions and Central Plains horse breeds and which regions produced the most filling sorghum.

Only after the subject of conversation had taken a great lap around the whole of Great Liang, up to the heavens and down to the mortal realm, would Gu Yun come to his senses.

"I went off-topic again, didn't I? What was I talking about again?"

Then the two of them would sit on the iron puppet's thighs, pondering which point had led them ten thousand miles off the mark while the iron beast's mechanical insides clicked away in the background.

At first, Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi were ecstatic to receive Marshal Gu's personal instruction. They endured every difficulty to join a few times, yawning through each lesson, only to come to the exact same conclusion—what the hell was this?!

"I'd rather listen to Shen-xiansheng recite scriptures," Ge Pangxiao commented privately.

"It's *General* Shen. Why do you always forget?" Cao Niangzi snapped back. But after thinking it over, he chose his conscience over a beautiful man in a rare show of principle and added, "I feel the same."

Only Chang Geng had no objections. Even if you asked him to wait at the door from dusk until dawn, he'd do it for the chance to spend that little time with Gu Yun every day. His sleep was filled with endless nightmares—so what use was sleep? And Gu Yun's instruction was just disorganized. If you listened closely to what he said, the contents were reliable and true.

Gu Yun's brash and carefree parents had brought him to the battlefield very young. He hadn't spent much time in the palace living in luxury, and had later followed a now-deceased old general down south to suppress bandits at the age of fifteen. He'd been roughing it with the rank and file ever since. Of the eight major military branches, aside from the Iron

Dragon, which sailed the seas, he'd worked closely with them all. He'd won victories and suffered many defeats, so he was as familiar with each of their advantages and disadvantages as someone might be with their own family treasures. Chang Geng soaked up the knowledge like a man dying of thirst.

To him, Gu Yun was like a towering mountain. Every day he glanced upward toward its peak, then put his head down and hiked in that direction for the rest of the day. He trusted that so long as he walked on in this manner, step by step, he would one day be able to suppress those inappropriate notions in his head.

Gu Yun himself, however, didn't see this as any sort of instruction.

He had specially hired a tutor and martial arts instructor to teach Chang Geng and the others, so to Gu Yun, these mornings were only about finding some time to play with Chang Geng. Gu Yun didn't think Chang Geng was suited to follow in his footsteps. He would rather the boy grow into an elegant gentleman, not a cutthroat general feared and avoided by gods and demons alike.

And just like that, the end of the year arrived.

As the new emperor offered sacrifice for the first year after his ascension to the throne, he changed the era name to Longan—Grand Peace—and announced a commensurately grand pardon of all under heaven.

Since the pardon was extended to all under heaven, it of course included the barbarian Crown Prince Jialai Yinghuo.

The emperor had resisted for over two months before finally expressing his intentions in this roundabout way. The old Wolf King's offer to increase the annual tribute by a tenth was too tempting, yet he didn't want to dismiss Gu Yun's concerns to his face. Thus, he put the question off every time it came up, letting the many memorials from the Ministry of Revenue and the Marquis of Anding pile up until at last the day came for the Son of Heaven to offer sacrifice. Now, he offered this resolution.

His Holiness the Emperor returned to the palace, the Imperial Guard flanking his path. Shen Yi rushed toward the convoy on horseback, galloping right up to Gu Yun, who was dressed in light pelt armor, before reining his horse to a stop.

Gu Yun gave him a look, then calmly turned his horse's head toward the Marquis Estate. Shen Yi hurried after. "Sir, His Majesty has his heart set on releasing this tiger back to its den. What do we do?"

"When the Son of Heaven offers sacrifice, every word is golden. He has expressed his grand aspirations to the heavens themselves. Is it my place to question them?" Gu Yun spoke, expressionless. "In order to placate me, His Majesty granted the Black Iron Battalion thirty war chariots and four hundred suits of steel armor. The decree has already been handed to the Lingshu Institute. Given that he has already shown such benevolence and performed his duty to this extent, how would it look for me to go on and on about such a minor affair?"

The new emperor had just turned thirty. He was already more unyielding than the late emperor had been in his waning years.

Gu Yun had no interest in political machinations, so he didn't care whether the emperor was unyielding or not. The issue was that this emperor's foreign policy was even more short-sighted than that of the late emperor. The two of them muttered back and forth for a while, until Gu Yun's tone relaxed.

"It's true that the national treasury is empty. His Majesty only recently ascended the throne. He must be impatient—you weren't there, but yesterday, that hairy foreigner Mister Tall Hat sent a monkey-faced envoy who chattered all afternoon. My ears are still ringing."

Shen Yi stared for a moment before he realized who he was referring to. "You mean the Western pope?"

Most citizens of Great Liang found the Westerners extremely improper. Their pope didn't stay put in his temple and burn his incense, but instead ran around in that giant hat showing his face everywhere and meddling in everything, heedless of their own emperor's words. Wasn't that practically treason?

"He claims they want to open up trade. I stayed and listened for a while—they want to open a large trade route along the Silk Road through the Western Regions, guarded by a bilateral contingent of soldiers to ensure safe passage for the merchants. He talked it up to the skies, and even had schematics drawn up trying to pull a great con on His Majesty."

Shen Yi laughed. “Trade is a good thing, what’s all this nonsense?”

“I’m not saying it’s not a good thing—and it’s not like I know anything about business.” Gu Yun sighed. “But I get the sense that the foreigners don’t have anything to gain by establishing trade with us. If there’s nothing in it for them, why would they do it? They have ulterior motives.”

This was true.

Far Western goods had started entering Great Liang during the time of Emperor Wu’s reign. Those glass lamps, Western mirrors, and other trinkets were quite the novelty for a few years, but none of them lasted long. The imported Western devices were exquisite, but they burned violet gold. Their entrance into the Central Plains ignited the black market for the vital fuel.

Emperor Wu saw the signs of danger for his country and instituted both soft and hard methods for tightening control on illicit civilian usage of violet gold. He enacted four laws in a single day: the foremost was that every region must strictly investigate illegal usage of violet gold, and all offenders were to be executed for conspiracy against the state without mercy. He regained his grasp on this lifeline of the nation with an iron hand. Then, with the Lingshu Institute taking the lead, he gathered a large cohort of civilian artificers who worked day and night creating an array of imitation goods similar to the Western trinkets but powered by coal or clockwork.

Emperor Wu used this hard blade to jam shut the outgoing flow of violet gold, and this soft blade to cut off the market for Far Western goods. Even if violet gold was available, who was unwilling to opt for cheaper coal? Besides, the Western style was too garish; residents of the Central Plains found the foreign items a tad embarrassing to use.

Genuine Western goods were quickly replaced by imitations, and business stalled for Western merchants. In comparison, silk and other fine goods from the Central Plains were all the rage with those hairy foreigners.

“Maybe I’m thinking too much,” said Gu Yun.

Shen Yi was silent for a while. “What does His Majesty think?”

The corners of Gu Yun's lips flicked up in a smile that landed somewhere between bitter and defiant. "His Majesty thinks we have nothing to fear. He thinks that with our Black Iron Battalion guarding the northwest, Great Liang is impenetrable. Even I didn't know I was so capable. You tell me whether I should be worried or not."

Shen Yi thought for a moment. "Did His Majesty say that to your face?"

Gu Yun laughed humorlessly. "Not only did he say it to my face, he granted me a fox-fur coat."

Marshal Gu wore unlined clothes year-round when in the capital. It was widely known that he only dressed warmly during snowstorms beyond the border. The emperor's gift of winter clothes contained a clear implicit message: get your ass back to the border.

Shen Yi fell silent.

"After the New Year, it'll be about time for me to return to the northwest anyway. The emperor can't sleep at night with the Black Iron Battalion loitering around in the Northern Camp all year."

At just a few words from the new emperor, their great nation with all its splendors would coalesce into a thread of hope that landed like a crushing weight upon the shoulders of the Marquis of Anding.

They all thought that, with the Black Iron Battalion in hand, he was omnipotent and invincible.

They relied on him, yet they feared him at the same time.

"Hey," said Gu Yun, injecting a little levity into his tone, "what if I just up and kick the bucket one day, what'll happen then?"

"Ugh, don't say that!" Shen Yi's face contorted.

"What's so taboo about it?" Gu Yun continued carelessly. "Life and death are up to fate, and wealth is up to the heavens. No one in the Gu family has ever lived to old age. Not only are we short-lived, our descendants are all rats born to weasels, each generation worse than the last. The old marquis sighed whenever he saw me back then, and now here I am, even more…bereft of successors."

"Don't you still have the fourth prince?"

Gu Yun shook his head. “That kid isn’t cut out for eating sand on the battlefield—tsk! It’s New Year’s Eve, why are we stuck on such distressing topics? Go reserve a red-headed kite for me. I’m heading home to pick up my son.”

He went galloping off, ditching Shen Yi in the middle of the road.

“Why didn’t you say something earlier?!” Shen Yi roared after him in rage, “There’re only twenty red-headed kites in the whole city, how am I supposed to reserve one today?”

“I’ll leave it up to you—”

The *you* flew on the back of the northwest wind to plaster itself all over Shen Yi’s face. By then, that so-called Marquis of Order had already left him in the dust.

Chang Geng was reading in his room like a well-behaved child when someone burst through the door from outside. He was hit full in the face with a gale of snow and wind. The papers that had been loose on his desk scattered across the room.

Gu Yun was the one and only obnoxious rascal who’d disturb his peace like this. Chang Geng looked back, exasperated. “Yifu.”

Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi crowded in behind Gu Yun, flanking him like the generals Heng and Ha at the sides of a temple door, and waved at Chang Geng in unison. “Dage, Dage, the marquis says we’re going to ride the red-headed kite.”

Chang Geng was a natural homebody. He liked quiet and disliked noise, and even seeing crowds of people irritated him. He used to go all the way out to General’s Slope to train with his sword because the courtyard of his own home was too narrow, but ever since arriving at the Marquis Estate, he’d never once felt the desire to go out and get fresh air. In his opinion, staying home and gathering around a little furnace with everyone to converse over a few cups of wine was a perfectly good New Year’s celebration.

Must they go out and freeze in the wind with other people? What sort of unpleasant hobby was this?

But Gu Yun had already taken the liberty of fetching his outer robe. “Hurry up, don’t dawdle. Uncle Wang said you haven’t left the Marquis Estate once since you moved in. Are you trying to grow mushrooms, sitting in here in the dark?”

Just the thought of the “grand sight” of seas of people in the capital streaming from every alleyway in celebration raised goosebumps all over Chang Geng’s skin. Even if Gu Yun was the one taking him out, he was still unwilling. So dawdle he did, casting around for an excuse. “Yifu, there are certain traditions for New Year’s Eve that must be observed. Someone has to stay to watch over the house, I—ah!”

Brooking no complaints, Gu Yun bundled Chang Geng up in that outer robe, hoisted him over his shoulder like a yelping rafter beam, and carried him out of the room. “You’re so particular for a little whelp.”

# Chapter 22:
# Kite’s Flight

CHANG GENG FLUSHED RED from head to toe. He was steaming from every pore, like he’d been cooked till he was crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. By now he was so angry he couldn’t even form words to yell.

Cao Niangzi was extremely envious of this rafter-beam treatment. Drooling at Marshal Gu’s back in infatuation, he whispered into Ge Pangxiao’s ear, “If I could get the marquis to carry me over his shoulder just once, I could die happy!”

Ge Pangxiao was an exceptionally loyal friend. At these words, he immediately wiped the snot from his nose, set his legs wide apart in a sturdy horse stance, took a deep breath, and puffed out his chest. Then he patted his shoulder like he was about to lift a heavy parcel, looking for all the world like he was preparing to sacrifice himself for a greater cause. “Come on up!”

Cao Niangzi looked him dead in the eyes, spat, then pattered off in a rage on mincing, pigeon-toed steps.

There was no city curfew on New Year’s Eve.

When they stepped outside the manor, Gu Yun finally remembered to allow his godson a bit of dignity and let him down. With an expression as sullen as a stagnant pond, Chang Geng strode ahead on long steps, body held stiffly enough to be a living flagpole. His cloak billowed behind him, hinting at the impressive bearing he’d have once he grew to his full height.

Gu Yun rubbed his nose, then chased after him and kept up his shameless antics with a smile. “Are you mad?”

Chang Geng shook off the arm Gu Yun slung over his shoulder. “I wouldn’t dare to be,” he said tersely.

“You don’t take a single step over the threshold all day. Aren’t you bored? Kids…”

Chang Geng gave him a dark look. Showing some tact for once, Gu Yun hurried to correct himself. “Young men—young men like you should have more energy. You’ve been alive for so few years, and you’ve already seen enough of this world?”

Chang Geng had nothing to say to this excessively energetic godfather. With a blank expression on his face and his mouth shut tight, he once again moved to sweep aside Gu Yun’s grabbing hand. But the instant he brushed Gu Yun’s fingertips, Chang Geng shivered at the iciness of his touch. With a frown, Chang Geng reached back and grabbed Gu Yun’s hand, seeing that it was blue with cold and as frigid as a corpse that had just been dug up from the ground.

Of course. Humans didn’t burn violet gold in their bellies. Running around in unlined clothes in the middle of the winter, how could he not be cold?

Chang Geng’s heart ached, and this ache stoked the fire inside him. Stewing in anger, he deftly removed the cloak from around his shoulders and wrapped it around Gu Yun without so much as a by-your-leave. Gu Yun had to lean down to meet him, but he didn’t duck away, indulgently allowing Chang Geng to fasten the collar and accepting this sulky gesture of filial piety with a radiant smile.

*Having a son is great!* he thought to himself. *When little Chang Geng grows up, I’ll have to find someone and get one of my own—if it’s a daughter, even better.*

On New Year’s Eve in the capital, starting at five forty-five in the evening, a horn would blow every quarter hour to signal the approaching footsteps of the upcoming year.

The sky above the city echoed with gongs and drums and the popping of firecrackers, red paper swirling through the air like brightly colored butterflies. Two-legged figures crowded along the banks of the rivers, atop every building, flooding every street. A glance was enough to make Chang Geng’s scalp prickle. It really looked as if all the world’s people had been crammed into the little space within the city gates. Compared to this level of festivities, Yanhui Town’s bustling market that jostled people into the river every year was practically deserted.

At this moment, Chang Geng found Gu Yun, who had dragged him outside—and his spirited companions Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi too—utterly incomprehensible. He clutched Gu Yun's icy hand, trying to warm him up as much as he could, while keeping one eye on those two country kids gawking at everything around them. His attention was stretched in five directions at once—he was a natural-born worrier.

A long cry somewhere between that of an eagle and a crane sounded from high in the air, and the crowd cheered.

"The red-headed kite!"

"Look, the first red-headed kite is taking off!"

In such a vital location as the capital, right at the Son of Heaven's feet, there was a blanket ban on air traffic above the city. Countless parhelion bows were mounted on the nine city gates. Any who dared approach the capital from the sky, even a Black Hawk, could look forward to being shot down on sight.

The only exception was New Year's Eve.

Leading out from the Imperial City was a wide road that cut straight through the capital all the way to the outskirts of the city. At the end of this broad avenue lay the symbol of the entire Central Plains—Kite's Flight Pavilion.

According to legend, when those seafaring Westerners first crossed the ocean and arrived in the Central Plains, they knew of only two famous locations: the Imperial Palace and Kite's Flight Pavilion.

Kite's Flight Pavilion was not a single pavilion. Using money appropriated from the military budget, the late emperor had ordered the construction of this grand edifice in the twenty-first year of Yuanhe as a place to host visitors from around the globe. It was an impressive structure divided into northern and southern sections. The northern end consisted of a row of tall, domed towers, called the Great Yunmeng Outlook, while the southern end was a single tall platform. Some cynically called it "Moon-Shot Platform" in private—though of course, no one dared call it that in the open. Instead, people typically referred to it as "Kite's Landing."

North and south faced each other, symbolizing the square earth and the round sky above, standing opposite the Imperial Palace in the distance.

On New Year's Eve every year, Kite's Landing would become the center of the entire capital. Famous traveling courtesans and actors would bend themselves over backwards just to perform a song atop this lofty stage, and oceans of onlookers amassed at its base. The viewing decks of the Great Yunmeng Outlook would likewise fill with throngs of officials and nobles.

And after five forty-five in the evening, twenty red-headed kites would take off from Kite's Landing.

The red-headed kites operated on similar principles as the giant kites used at the border. But while countless barbarians would cower at the sight of a giant kite, the red-headed kite was entirely a vehicle of pleasure. They were fashioned in the shape of boats, with fiery-red koi fish carved at the prow and stern. Each kite flew with the aid of eighty-one fire pinions, and the bodies of the ships were tethered to Kite's Landing using a special type of rope that was translucent like spider's silk.

When the fire pinions ignited, twenty or more red-headed kites would hang steadily in midair like enormous scarlet koi fish, swaying like willows in the breeze. The view from these heights was unsurpassed. On the deck of each kite was an enclosed private cabin surrounded by an outdoor viewing platform. Orders for food and drink could be sent down along that web-like rope, and the people on the deck of the kite would see the city ablaze with lights, the red walls and forbidden areas of the palace laid out beneath them.

Gu Yun led the three half-grown kids up the small path to the side of Kite's Landing like he had done this a thousand times. The guard on night duty started when he recognized Gu Yun and tried to dip into a bow before Gu Yun stopped him with an airy wave of his hand. "I'm just taking these kids out to play, no need for all the formalities. Have you seen General Shen?"

A fire attendant ran over. "My lord, this way please. General Shen is waiting for you on the kite."

Gu Yun gave a composed nod in response, but inwardly, he was impressed. He had just wanted to bring Chang Geng and the others to get a look at all the fun—he never expected that Shen Yi would be so infallible as to actually reserve a ship for them!

Ge Pangxiao’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head as he stared at the red-headed kites. Following at Gu Yun’s heels, he asked, “My lord, are we going up to the heavens?”

“There’s no rush; you can wait a few more decades for that. We’re just scouting the place out today.”

Listening to the two of them exchange such outlandish well-wishes this New Year’s Eve, Chang Geng wanted to plug up both their mouths.

The interior of the private cabin on the red-headed kite was as warm as spring. As soon as Gu Yun stepped inside, he shrugged off Chang Geng’s cloak and draped it over the back of a chair. Shen Yi had already ordered enough food to fill the table, and there were even a few attractive young men and women standing at attention off to the side. Some of the bolder ones snuck glances at Marquis Gu. Glancing around the room, Gu Yun was surprised—Shen Yi was an old pedant at heart; even Western paintings were enough to sully his eyes. He tirelessly maintained that prudish image. So, why didn’t he dismiss this crowd of pretty young things?

Gu Yun shot Shen Yi a questioning glance. Shen Yi leaned in to whisper in his ear. “When Prince Wei heard you were looking to reserve a red-headed kite, he insisted on giving this ship up to you.”

Gu Yun said nothing for a while after hearing that, his face blank.

The fire attendant was quite solicitous, and came up to ask him, “My lord, shall I light the fire?”

Gu Yun paused for a moment, then nodded. “Go ahead—oh right, call all the brothers standing guard on the viewing platform inside for New Year’s Eve dinner. There’re no outsiders here today, so no need to stand on ceremony.”

The fire attendant acknowledged the order and backed respectfully off the red-headed kite, jumping down to the exposed platform below before calling out the message.

Several Black Iron Battalion soldiers entered shortly after, making a crisp, practiced salute. “Sir!”

The cold aura emanating from the black iron they wore seeped into the beguiling warmth of the room, dispersing the sensuous atmosphere

inside.

Gu Yun glanced out of the corner of his eye at the servants, who had the good sense to retreat. An especially beautiful girl among them shot him a flirtatious look as she left. Gu Yun smiled in return, regretting that with three half-grown kids in tow, these late-night entertainments would be limited to such glances.

Shen Yi affected a sanctimonious cough, and Gu Yun looked away as if nothing was the matter. He did a convincing impression of an upstanding citizen as he complained. “Just how old is Prince Wei again? And yet he’s still acting so inappropriately.”

Shen Yi’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Ha ha.”

Fortunately, the three youths had been attracted by the fire pinions which lit up along the perimeter of the red-headed kite, and all of them were pressed up against the windowsill looking out. They hadn’t noticed the salacious undercurrent swirling between the adults in the room.

The fire pinions crackled and buzzed, and a wave of heat hit the three boys in the face, window lattices rattling in the gale. Chang Geng felt the floor lurch beneath him and instinctively grabbed the windowsill to keep his balance as Cao Niangzi yelped. The red-headed kite trembled lightly, then rose up into the sky.

At seven in the evening, fireworks erupted from the top of Kite’s Landing, filling the air between the twenty-some red-headed kites with color. Even the spider silk keeping them connected to the platform was dyed an orangey red. Kite’s Landing rose into the air, iron gears clicking away beneath it, and a red-clad dancer holding a pipa began to sing.

Was there a more resplendent sight than this in the heavens and earth?

Shen Yi opened a bottle of grape wine and poured Gu Yun a cup. “This is from the first yearly tribute after the rebellions in the Western Regions were put down. Fine grape wine in a luminous jade cup—a wine fit for champions. Have a taste.”

Gu Yun stared at that luminous jade cup for a while, a blankness creeping into his expression. He picked up the cup, took a sip, then set it back down. There was nothing wrong with the wine, but something about the taste soured his mouth.

“Forget it, I can’t get used to this kind. Let’s have Hua Diao yellow wine instead. Looks like I’m not a champion, but a chimp—Ay, sit down, everyone, don’t mind them, they ate at home, let them play.”

As he spoke, his vision started to go blurry. He swiftly looked down, pinching the bridge of his nose. This was a sign—the medicine he took a few days ago was about to wear off. The effect took just under an hour to fade, and his vision usually went before his hearing.

Shen Yi realized what was happening the moment he saw Gu Yun’s subtle movements. “Sir?”

“It’s nothing.” Gu Yun shook his head and picked up a fresh cup of wine before raising a toast to the table. “All of you here today are the finest warriors of our Great Liang, one in a thousand. But under my command, you’ve received neither honor nor riches, neither benefits nor power. You’ve lived a poor and difficult life on the borders, but received only a meager salary. Everyone has suffered demoralizing treatment. I dedicate this first cup to all our brothers here.”

He drained the cup, then filled it again without pause or explanation. “I dedicate this second cup to our brothers left behind in the Western Regions. I carelessly led them out there, but I failed to bring them home—”

Shen Yi interjected. “Sir, it’s the New Year. That’s enough.”

Gu Yun gave him a smile and dropped the subject. He drained his second cup, then filled it again.

“This third cup,” Gu Yun said quietly, “I dedicate to the heavens above and the earth below, may all the demons and deities be kind to our comrades’ souls.”

Chang Geng stood by the window. At some point, the grandeur outside had lost its ability to hold his attention. He turned and stared unblinkingly at Gu Yun.

He had seen Gu Yun in high spirits and full of ardor, he had seen Gu Yun lazy and lackadaisical, but he had never seen him desolately raising his cup and downing it in a single draft. This side of his godfather was practically a stranger to him. Thinking back, Gu Yun never lost his temper in front of him and rarely showed fatigue or discontent. He was always teasing, amiable yet annoying. It was as if, aside from this one face, none of his other expressions were fit to be shown to Chang Geng.

Because he was nothing but a powerless child.

Chang Geng suddenly thought that he had to become strong as soon as possible.

At that moment, Ge Pangxiao turned around and yelled, “My lord! General Shen! The foreigners brought a bunch of dancing animals! Look!”

# Chapter 23:
# Fierce Tiger

GU YUN produced a glass monocle from within his lapels and carefully placed it on his nose. He strolled up to Chang Geng, pushed open the window, and squinted toward Kite's Landing. The glass monocle was attached to a fine, white gold chain, which swooped up to his ear. The lens obscured one peach blossom eye but highlighted the arch of his nose, adding a sharp edge to his aura, like a deadly predator in human clothes.

Chang Geng stared blankly at him for a while, then asked, "Yifu, what are you wearing?"

Gu Yun looked over and teased, "A little trinket from the foreigners. Doesn't it look good on me? These things are all the rage over there right now. Later, when we take a walk around, I'll catch you a foreigner stepmom, okay?"

Chang Geng was once again overcome with irritation.

A little soldier from the Black Hawk Division, attempting to ease the heavy mood, quipped, "Sir, you're not even his birth father!"

Gu Yun laughed along with his joke without a care in the world.

The little soldier continued, gesturing along with every word, "Things have changed these last few years. People aren't like they were in the old days. In the old days, women cared about our virtues, our abilities, and our personalities; none of us had to worry. But now, they only care about whether men are handsome or not. Sir, us brothers aren't single dogs because we're ugly, it's because we were born at the wrong time."

The Black Iron Battalion's local specialty was single dogs, so upon hearing this, the whole table erupted in loud guffaws.

Gu Yun laughed boisterously. "Get out, don't drag me into this! Who's ugly? I'll have you know that I am the famed flower of the three black iron divisions, and legends of my beauty have already crossed the boundless sea."

Stupefied by their marshal’s shamelessness, this crowd of rough military men roared with laughter. Shen Yi said with a chill in his voice, “Sir, if your distinguished self is as beautiful as a flower, how is it that you still can’t find a wife?”

He zeroed in on Gu Yun’s sore spot with a single line. Marshal Gu could only clutch his heart and retort, “I’m waiting for the right price to sell, the best goods have to come last. What would you understand about such things?”

The truth of the matter was, Gu Yun really wasn’t at fault for this.

Back then, the late emperor’s attitude toward him had been contradictory to the extreme. The emperor cared for him, yes, but was also on guard against him. It was less apparent when he was young, but as he got older, the important matter of the Marquis of Anding’s marriage became a thorn in the late emperor’s side. If he chose someone of lowly birth, people might say he was mistreating the descendant of a loyal servant, and no one would accept the choice. But if he chose someone from a noble and powerful family, the late emperor’s heart would begin to patter in fear. Caught between a rock and a hard place, the late emperor must have wished Gu Yun was a little eunuch.

The matter of the Marquis of Anding’s marriage was dragged out for a long time, until the late emperor finally settled on the daughter of Grand Secretary Guo. The Guo family had been scholars for generations, of pure and noble heritage, and Miss Guo herself was as beautiful as an orchid and renowned throughout the capital for her talents. She and the then-crown princess, now-empress, were known as the Twin Beauties of the capital. This match involved no political tangles, nor did it dishonor Gu Yun.

But the strange thing was, as soon as this celebrated blossom was betrothed, she began to wither like she’d suffered a bout of frost, declining by the day. And before Gu Yun could return to the capital from the battlefield, Miss Guo had already passed away. Plenty of people lost their wives; it was nothing rare. And, in this case, it had only been a fiancée whom he hadn’t even married. But because he was the Marquis of Anding, everyone made the connection to his widowed and childless grandfather and his parents who had died so young.

And just like that, the story that the Marquis of Anding had a fate hostile to wives spread like wildfire.

Marrying the Marquis of Anding would earn you a good match both in appearance and actuality. Plus, there were no in-laws to worry about, so it would be a tremendously fortunate opportunity. But no matter how fortunate the opportunity, one needed to be alive to enjoy it.

After the death of his fiancée, Gu Yun spent his time traveling back and forth between the Western Regions and the northern border. He didn't return to the capital for four or five years, so there was no opportunity to bring the matter up again. And now the late emperor had kicked the bucket. While the current emperor had a few years on Gu Yun, he grew up calling him Imperial Uncle. They were of different generations, so despite their status as lord and minister, it was somewhat improper for him to intervene in Gu Yun's marriage.

Gu Yun himself had no time or energy to spare on the matter, so it was put off again and again, all the way until now.

Shen Yi refused to let it go. "Waiting for the right price? Sir, who exactly are you trying to sell yourself to?"

Gu Yun looked up through the glass monocle and saw Chang Geng watching him closely, a hint of apprehension on his face. Gu Yun guessed the youth feared he'd stop caring for him after he got married. He gave the back of Chang Geng's head a comforting pat. "My type is someone intelligent, gentle, and good-natured. Don't worry, I won't bring home some shrew to disturb your peace."

These few words carved open a hole in Chang Geng's chest. The wild fancies he had nearly managed to subdue poured out again, stirring up a desolate melancholy. With no way to vent his tumultuous feelings, Chang Geng could only paste a stiff smile onto his face, exerting the same level of determination he used to will himself to sleep every single night.

Just then, a clamor arose from Kite's Landing down below. The Westerners had taken away the monkeys and parrots that had been jumping around on stage and brought out a large iron cage draped with a flannel cloth in their place. A Western clown with a ghastly pale face twirled around as he set up a large flaming ring, wiggling and gesticulating to drum up an air of suspense. Finally, he ripped away the cloth with a flourish.

A large tiger crouched within the cage.

Ge Pangxiao stuck his whole upper body out the window, questions tumbling from his mouth. “Is it real or fake? Is that an actual, real-life tiger?”

The clown opened the steel cage and led the tiger out by the collar. Perhaps because there were too many people watching, the tiger seemed restless, struggling in the clown’s grip.

Gu Yun frowned. “These foreigners have quite a creative interpretation of the rules, bringing such a beast here on New Year’s Eve—Xiao-Jia.” His voice was cold.

The young Black Hawk who had been the most talkative earlier became solemn at once. “Sir.”

“Find some people to keep an eye on things. There’s a lot of people down there; we don’t want another disturbance.”

Xiao-Jia acknowledged his orders and obeyed immediately, jumping right off the exposed balcony. Suspended several hundred meters in the air, his silhouette flashed and disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving a thin trail of white steam behind him. Amid the cacophony of voices below, the tiger began to reluctantly jump through the ring of fire, the beast’s expression as furious as an honorable girl forced into prostitution.

The cries of approval from the Great Yunmeng Outlook swelled louder and louder, and some spectators grew excited enough to start tossing money down from above. Tossing a few copper coins onto Kite’s Landing after a pleasing performance of music, dance, or acrobatics was harmless, a common occurrence on this stage. But today, some idiot had shown up and started throwing around gold leaves.

The crowd erupted. Shouts of, “Gold, gold!” burst out one after another. The tiger, which was still leaping through the ring of fire at the behest of the clown, was fully startled this time. It roared and snapped its jaws at the clown, who was caught completely off guard. The man let out a blood-curdling scream as his arm and half his shoulder disappeared into the tiger’s maw.

The tiger roared again and broke free of its restraints, charging straight into the sea of people beneath Kite’s Flight Pavilion.

The inner ring of people, frightened out of their wits, scattered outward like a cloud of headless flies, but the spectators on the fringes of the crowd had no idea what had transpired. Having heard that those in the center were snatching gold leaves, they were still trying to press their way in. Inside and outside collided, and now no one could move.

Some yelled, “Gold!” while others sobbed, “Tiger!” and still others fell and couldn’t get up at all. Everything sank into utter turmoil.

The Golden Crow Guard on duty that night were shoved back and forth by the crowd. Many officials and nobles were clustered around Kite’s Flight Pavilion, and some, caring more for their own escape than for the lives of commoners, put on airs even as they ran for their lives, ordering their servants to force open a path for them.

Gu Yun grabbed Chang Geng by the shoulder and yanked him back, turning to retrieve the bow and arrows Shen Yi had hung behind the door. “Stay inside.”

The Black Iron Battalion soldiers at the table stood up along with him. Shen Yi grabbed Gu Yun’s elbow and blurted out, “Your eyes…”

Ever keen, Chang Geng’s head snapped up. *Eyes? What about his eyes?*

Gu Yun ignored him. He waved aside Shen Yi’s hand and kicked open the door of the private cabin. The Black Hawks aboard the red-headed kite leapt from the deck and flew down close to the ground, like small fireworks bursting with cold light. Another black-iron-armored soldier took high ground by climbing the ship’s mast, a copper squall in hand. He bellowed at the surging crowd, “The Marquis of Anding is here, keep still!”

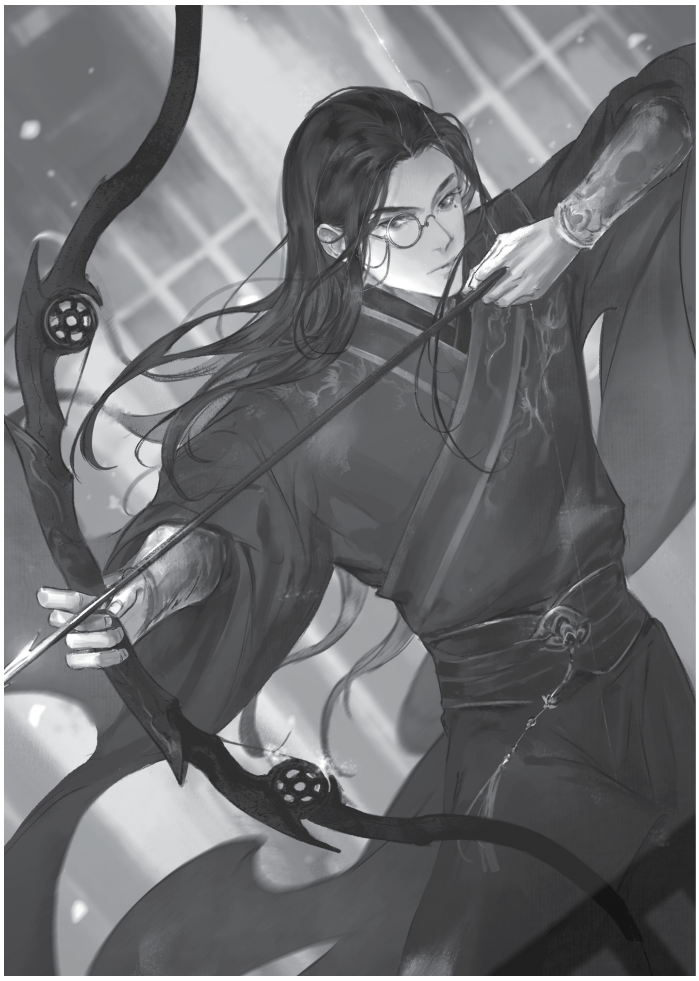
The announcement was more effective than an edict from the emperor himself. Quite a few individuals instinctively stopped in their tracks the instant they heard those three words, “Marquis of Anding.”

The tiger’s roar echoed from below as the enraged animal pounced like a bolt of lightning. In a flash, it had a young man in servants’ garb pinned beneath its claws. Gu Yun stood braced on the koi-carved prow of the red-headed kite, half leaning against the frame of the private cabin’s door, and turned his body to draw the bow.

The glass monocle was still sitting on his nose. No one wore lenses when they shot; such things would cause discrepancies in one's vision. His thin clothing flapped in the hot wind raised by the fire pinions, his entire person giving off an air of insouciant carelessness, like he was shooting with his eyes closed. Only Shen Yi knew that if Gu Yun were to remove that glass monocle, the man wouldn't be able to tell a human from a beast at ten meters' distance—no different than if his eyes were really shut tight.

Why did this have to happen now? A layer of sweat broke out on Shen Yi's palms as his entire body tensed.

Gu Yun loosed the arrow.



# Chapter 24:
# Wicked Monk

THE ARROW FLEW like a shooting star, drawing a straight line through the complicated spider's web of ropes connecting the twenty red-headed kites to sink deep into the back of the tiger's neck. The force behind this arrow was immense, and it pierced straight through the tiger's enormous skull with a *pop*. The animal staggered, then collapsed to the ground without a single mewl, dead on the spot.

Gu Yun didn't stop there. He turned and drew the bow again, nocking a second arrow. Back still pressed against the cabin door, he adjusted his angle, taking barely a moment to aim before the second arrow sprang from his bow to bury itself in a pillar on the observation platform from which those gold leaves had been tossed. Cries of alarm rose up from the platform. The arrow had brushed the top of a foreigner's head and nailed his hat to the pillar, feathered fletching still trembling with the force of impact. The foreigner tumbled out of his seat in terror.

Gu Yun lowered the bow and, face blank, said to the Black Carapace guard with the copper squall, "Harboring sinister motives. Arrest them for interrogation."

Only then did the young man pinned by the corpse of the tiger snap out of his daze and begin to sob. Those close by, who'd been frozen in shock, came to their senses and hurried to free him. And at the base of Kite's Landing, a small and slender figure, unremarkable and unnoticed amid the chaos, wove through the crowd and slipped onto a pleasure craft docked at the nearby lake.

Upon boarding the ship, he removed his head cloth, revealing the face of a foreigner with black hair and black eyes. Though foreign, his features bore some resemblance to the people of the Central Plains. He was quickly admitted into a private room on the ship, where he met the person who had been awaiting him.

The man was clad in white, with a richly embroidered red robe trailing behind him. A staff carved in a strange style rested at his side, and

his graying, curled hair hung at his shoulders, arranged into a neat coiffure. He wore a large ring in a ceremonial style. This was the pope's envoy.

The short, black-haired foreigner dropped respectfully to one knee. "My lord."

The man in white leaned forward slightly, signaling that he was listening.

"I'm afraid the results are as you expected," the black-haired foreigner said. "Gu and his house have a practically totemic significance to these Easterners. As long as 'the black crow' flies across the night sky, the idiot commoners will be blindly comforted no matter what danger they face, like sheep who have found their sheepdog. This belief is incomprehensible, bordering on superstition; I'd wager some among them couldn't even tell you Gu Yun's full name."

The man in white mulled this over a while, expression dark and unreadable. "The seed did not cause any casualties."

"Practically none at all." The black-haired man bowed his head. "The Marquis of Anding just so happened to be on a red-headed kite, and it seems he embedded his soldiers in the crowd. I don't know if some of our own exposed us, or if he just has a superhuman sensitivity to danger. As soon as we sowed the seeds, the black crows reacted. Gu shot the seed dead with a single arrow from atop a red-headed kite. He also captured the sower."

The man in white leaned back in his carved chair, fingers stroking his beard. "This trusted reputation doesn't rest on his achievements alone, but on the collected efforts of three generations. The people of the Central Plains have a blind faith in these black crows, and it's nearly become a faith in the house of Gu itself."

"The Church has investigated why, despite all the failings of Eastern society, their common people maintain such a ragged peace. It is my belief that this type of faith must be one of the reasons," said the black-haired man.

At this, the man in white rose from his chair and began to pace the deck of the ship, hands clasped behind his back.

“This is an opportunity,” he muttered, “not an obstacle—I must write a letter to the pope. We can initiate the Loulan Stratagem immediately.”

Before long, order was restored at the base of Kite’s Flight Pavilion. The Imperial Guard swiftly arrived at the scene to help. Taking a look around, Gu Yun saw his job was done. He gestured meaningfully to Shen Yi, then prepared to leave—by now, his eyesight was extremely blurry and his hearing was also starting to go. Even the raucous clamor of the myriad voices around him had dimmed to a murmur.

Gu Yun turned to the Black Hawk guard. “I have some business to attend to,” he said, “so I’ll be heading out first. You stay with His Highness and the others. If they want to go home, wait until things settle down a bit out there before bringing them back. If they want to keep playing on the red-headed kite, that’s also fine—there might be more performances tonight.”

“Yifu, what about you?” Chang Geng asked urgently.

Gu Yun couldn’t hear what he said at all. He just patted his shoulder and hastily strode off. The rumbling beneath their feet swelled, and the red-headed kite touched down briefly on Kite’s Landing. Gu Yun and Shen Yi hurried off side by side. The night was icy with frost. Chang Geng snatched up the cloak Gu Yun had left draped over the chair, intending to chase after him, but was stopped by a Black Hawk standing to the side.

“Your Highness, please wait,” said the Black Hawk. “Our marshal doesn’t wear winter clothes within the capital. Everything is still chaotic outside; please don’t leave this subordinate’s side.”

Chang Geng’s suspicions instantly redoubled. Why didn’t Gu Yun dress properly for the weather? Was he so insensitive to the cold?

And there was also the way Shen Yi had let slip the words “your eyes” mid-emergency. This thought stuck like something caught in his throat. Chang Geng couldn’t help but recall that fake deaf-blind Shen Shiliu from Yanhui Town—was it really only an act to fool Xiu-niang and all the barbarians trying to infiltrate the northern border?

Too much thought bred anxiety. Chang Geng felt a pressing sense of unease, which persisted unabated even after the Black Hawk had dutifully

delivered the boys to the Marquis Estate. Back in his room, Chang Geng tossed and turned, unable to sleep. After sending away Cao Niangzi and Ge Pangxiao, he secretly wrapped himself in his outer robes and went to wait in Gu Yun's room.

Gu Yun's room was spotless. It had that neat and orderly air unique to military men, with no superfluous ornamentation. There were a few books and an old gas lamp on the table. A piece of calligraphy hung on the wall, with the words THE WORLD IS INESCAPABLE unmistakably written in Gu Yun's own hand. Aside from a brand-new fox-fur coat hanging at the head of the bed, the Marquis of Anding's room was simple to the point of appearing impoverished.

After waiting a long while, Chang Geng inadvertently fell asleep sprawled out over the little table. With his chest curled and cramped in this position, he quickly spiraled into tumultuous dreams.

In a daze, he saw Gu Yun standing before him, back turned. Without the reservations of his waking self, the dream Chang Geng was much more bold. He wrapped his arms intimately around that figure from behind. "Yifu."

Gu Yun slowly turned his head—but his eyes were empty voids, and two lines of blood slid down his cheeks like trails of tears. "Were you calling me?"

Chang Geng jolted awake with a cry, then shuddered as a freezing wind swept through the door. He stared blankly at the person who had just walked in from the cold.

Gu Yun didn't expect to find Chang Geng in his room. He hastily closed the door, shutting out the breeze, and asked, "What are you doing here?"

His voice was a little hoarse, and the look on his face was unpleasant.

When Chang Geng saw Gu Yun, he finally let out the breath that was caught in his throat. For a moment, he couldn't tell dream from reality, and was as overjoyed as if he had reunited with a long-lost companion.

Gu Yun braced himself against the doorframe for a moment, weathering a wave of dizziness, before weakly beckoning Chang Geng to him. "Come help me over—I have to bring you to the palace to give your

New Year’s wishes to His Majesty tomorrow morning. Don’t stay up so late you’ll be too tired to get up.”

Chang Geng took his elbow and guided him to the bed. “Yifu, what’s wrong?”

“I got dragged to the Northern Camp on the way back. I had too much to drink.” Gu Yun didn’t even remove his shoes before collapsing back on the bed. He’d just taken his medicine and his head was ringing, sparing him hardly any energy to speak. “Go back and get some rest.”

A furrow appeared on Chang Geng’s brow—Gu Yun did smell like alcohol, but the scent was faint, and his words were clear with no slurring. Even if he said so, it didn’t seem like he’d had too much to drink. But before he could question him any further, Gu Yun had already gone silent. He’d fallen asleep the instant his head hit the pillow. Chang Geng could only take off his shoes and socks and pull the blanket up to tuck it around him. Feeling as if the night’s chill still clung to Gu Yun’s body, he turned up the steam brazier in the room, then leaned against the bedpost, quietly looking at Gu Yun’s sleeping face.

“I’m not imagining things.” He repeated this to himself three times, then leaned slightly closer to Gu Yun like a trembling little animal, as if he wanted to sniff the scent coming from his body. Chang Geng couldn’t help but hold his breath instead.

Chang Geng felt like he had just shut his eyes, having gotten so little sleep he hadn’t even finished his usual nightmare, when Gu Yun dragged him out of bed and began cleaning and dressing him. He followed Marshal Gu listlessly into the palace to give the Longan Emperor, his elder brother at least in name, his New Year’s wishes.

On the way, Gu Yun said to him, “However His Majesty treats you, don’t take it to heart. When the empress dowager was still alive, she didn’t quite get along with the noble consort. But those are all the affairs of the last generation. It has nothing to do with you… Tsk, what a bad omen.”

Chang Geng had been absentmindedly nodding along until he heard Gu Yun curse under his breath. He looked up to see Gu Yun frowning at a carriage.

It was a carriage from the Temple of National Protection. The imperial family of Great Liang were Buddhists, and even Gu Yun's fierce and resolute grandfather was no exception. The new Longan Emperor was especially religious. Whenever he had a moment of leisure, he would join the high monks in their meditation and metaphysical circumlocution.

What Gu Yun hated most weren't the foreigners on every border, but these baldies. That old bald donkey of an abbot at the National Temple had no concept of gaining good karma by avoiding bad language, and instead had an incorrigible crow's beak that was unable to go a day without saying something ominous. Ever since Gu Yun was young, this man had insisted his fate would be the death of all his familial relations, and to this day, the Marquis of Anding blamed his bachelor status on the monks of the National Temple.

When the Longan Emperor Li Feng's eunuch attendant saw Gu Yun approaching, he quickly jogged over. This eunuch was a large man, almost of a height with Marshal Gu but three times as wide. He was naturally born with a pair of ten-centimeter feet, the same size as those who had them purposely bound. When he pattered over on tiny steps, he was like a broad-leaved palm tree waving in the wind, so graceful was his bearing. This person was surnamed Zhu. Everyone called him Zhu-gonggong[23] to his face, but Zhu "Little Feet" Xiaojiao behind his back. Zhu Xiaojiao had a bad reputation. He kept two slick-haired and powder-faced "godsons" outside the palace, but who knew what he kept them around for.

Zhu Xiaojiao's face creased in a subservient smile as he came up to Gu Yun. "My lord and the fourth prince are here? Abbot Liao Chi is in the middle of a discussion with His Majesty, but they said once you arrive, you should go right in. It's been a long time since Abbot Liao Chi has seen you —Oh, what a coincidence, here they come!"

As he spoke, two monks walked out one after the other.

Gu Yun knew the one in front. He was as wrinkly as a walnut, a dreary look on his face like he'd never eaten a full meal in his life. He was Liao Chi, the Abbot of the National Temple. Gu Yun's gaze drifted to the monk behind him. This monk was in his twenties or thirties, wearing a snowy-white kasaya, and had a face as beautiful as a painting. His clean

monk’s shoes trod over the side path in the Imperial City like an immortal walking across snow.

As much as Gu Yun detested those baldies, in that moment, he couldn’t help but recall the legendary monks of old and their long pilgrimages to the distant land of Sindhu.

The young monk sensed his scrutiny and met Gu Yun’s eyes. His gaze was clear, as if a grand pool of stars rested in his eyes—a single glance could make a person sink within them. The monk pressed his hands together and bowed across the courtyard to Gu Yun in greeting.

Gu Yun averted his eyes as if waking from a dream. *Why am I staring at that baldie for no good reason?* He ignored the other party and rudely looked away, turning to Zhu Xiaojiao to ask, “Who’s that pretty boy with the old bald donkey?”

Zhu Xiaojiao had watched the marquis grow up and was familiar with his temper. “That’s the Abbot’s shidi, Great Master Liao Ran. He just returned from a journey overseas.”

*Liao Ran—“to understand”? What the hell kind of dead obvious Dharma name is that?* Gu Yun said to himself. *Sounds cursed just hearing it.*

But despite his distaste for this new monk, the man would insist on getting in his face.

# Chapter 25:
# An Imminent Separation

ABBOT LIAO CHI made his way over with his pretty-boy shidi in tow and bowed in greeting to Gu Yun. With a smile that crinkled his face into a burst of lines like a dragon's claw chrysanthemum in full bloom, he said, "My lord, after so many years, your graceful bearing is the same as ever. This truly is the fortune of our entire nation of Great Liang."

Gu Yun's stomach began to ache at the sight of this old man's ugly face. He said to himself, *Tell me about it. You haven't managed to curse me to death yet, after all.*

Of course, as the Marquis of Order, Gu Yun couldn't throw a temper tantrum; he had to maintain at least a semblance of dignity. So he just nodded with an outwardly placid expression. "It's all thanks to your well-wishes, Great Master."

The pretty-boy monk Liao Ran went through the standard motions of paying his respects, but his smiling mouth did not open with any greeting. Gu Yun couldn't help sneaking another glance at him. Liao Chi explained, "My lord, please do not find fault with him. Although my shidi has excellent understanding and is highly advanced in his study of Buddhist doctrine, he was born to follow a vow of silence."

Gu Yun started. This Liao Ran was mute.

The monk named Liao Ran walked up and reached out to Gu Yun. This monk's skin was so pale it was nearly blinding, which made his eyes and brows appear even darker in contrast, like charred wood fallen in snow. If he weren't a monk, he definitely would have had long hair as dark as ink, and with those red lips and white teeth, he would practically be a fey creature shaped from porcelain.

Gu Yun frowned slightly. *What is he doing, performing a consecration on me?*

"My lord's well-being concerns the security of our borders," Liao Chi explained. "You must be leaving the capital soon, so my shidi wishes to

bless you for your safety.”

Gu Yun sneered. “Many thanks to the great master, but that won’t be necessary. I’ve never recited a single sutra in my life nor offered one stick of incense; I won’t disturb the Buddha.”

“Amitabha Buddha, the way of the Buddha has no limits in offering deliverance to all living beings. My lord, your words are in error.”

The very words “Amitabha Buddha” made Gu Yun want to smack someone. His patience had reached its limit—he didn’t want to keep blathering on with them, so he took his leave with a cool, “His Majesty is waiting. I cannot tarry any longer. I’ll call on the great master another day, so please excuse me.”

With that, he dragged Chang Geng off deeper into the palace, following Zhu Xiaojiao’s lead. Chang Geng couldn’t help but glance back. Liao Ran hadn’t been at all affected by Gu Yun’s attitude. The monk was still as pious as if he were kneeling at the Buddha’s feet, his lips mouthing silent words—like he would force the blessings he was praying for onto Gu Yun’s retreating figure whether the marquis liked it or not.

He seemed to be saying, *Whether you believe is up to you, but whether I offer deliverance is up to me.*

Chang Geng was still spacing out when he felt a tug on his arm. Gu Yun whispered huffily, “What are you staring at that monk for? Careful you don’t blind yourself.”

Chang Geng looked away without protest and asked, “Yifu, that great master said you’re leaving the capital. Is that true?”

“Mm.”

“When?” Chang Geng pressed.

“Hard to say,” said Gu Yun. “It depends on His Majesty’s intentions. If I leave, you’ll be the head of the household in the Marquis Estate; your word will be law. If there’s anything you don’t understand, discuss it with Uncle Wang.” He didn’t say anything like, *Read your books and focus on your martial studies*, because in these matters, Chang Geng’s diligence made even Gu Yun blush with shame despite being his elder.

At this revelation, Chang Geng was solidly stunned for a long moment. He finally managed to ask with difficulty, “Yifu isn’t planning to take me along?”

“Ah?” Gu Yun was mystified. “Why would I bring you along?”

Chang Geng’s steps came to a halt. He had never anticipated such an obstacle. From Yanhui Town to the capital, Gu Yun had always kept him by his side. Chang Geng had never contemplated that when his young godfather once again led his soldiers to the northwest, he would be half a country away from him.

In the blink of an eye, Chang Geng connected a whole chain of ideas in a flash of realization—to his godfather, he was nothing but a little kid with no scholarly or martial accomplishments. When soldiers went off to the borderlands, they brought their swords, their spears, and their armor… but who among them would bring a ward who would only get in their way? Once Gu Yun went back to the northwestern border, if things were peaceful, he might return to the capital once a year to report on his performance of his duties. But if there were any unrest, who could say how long he might stay? Chang Geng was already a full fourteen years of age; how many years of youth did he have left until his coming-of-age ceremony at twenty? When the time came, he would have to leave the Marquis of Anding’s protection and move out of the Marquis Estate on his own. Bearing this empty title he’d gained under incomprehensible circumstances, he’d be forced to live alone in the capital where he had nothing at all…

And his godfather would eventually take a wife and have children. By then, would he still remember the little burden he’d left at pasture to grow up alone in the Marquis Estate? They called each other father and son, but the connection between them was merely a ragged centimeter’s worth of lamp wick that would burn out as soon as it was lit. In the end, he would be left alone to drown in his endless dreams.

At this thought, it was like the entire palace had become an ice cellar, swallowing him down into a frozen world.

Seeing him stop all of a sudden, Gu Yun turned with a questioning look.

“I want to go to the border with you. I can join the army!” Chang Geng blurted out in a panic.

*Nonsense. It's so hard to drag you out the door just to take a walk. Join what army?* thought Gu Yun to himself. But after nearly half a year of living under the same roof with the boy, he'd more or less discovered a few tricks for acting like a proper member of the older generation. He didn't shoot Chang Geng down directly, but put on an exaggerated, almost artificially encouraging smile. "All right! You can be our staff officer in the future, little Highness."

Chang Geng was speechless. Clearly, Gu Yun had found the trick to parenting a four-year-old toddler a whole ten years too late.

Chang Geng's feelings of desperation and despair were wadded up and tossed back like they were nothing at all, not taken seriously in the slightest. He quietly shut his mouth. He didn't continue to struggle in vain, but stared intently at Gu Yun's slender back like he was staring at a narrow gate he must pass through even if it took his entire life to do it.

The Longan Emperor Li Feng was Chang Geng's elder brother in name, but it was impossible to see their blood relationship from their faces. The emperor looked much more like his late father. Technically, this was Chang Geng's second time meeting him and now, absent the chaos and panic of their first encounter, he got a much better look at him. The new emperor was just past the age of thirty, the prime of a man's life, and he had an honest and well-favored countenance. Even if he wasn't the emperor, one might guess that he wouldn't do too poorly for himself just by assessing his character from his face.

Chang Geng was a scrupulous person, and he'd gotten especially good at reading people's expressions after arriving in the capital. Gu Yun rarely spoke about the emperor, but Shen-xiansheng was more open on the subject. Shen Yi had many complaints about the emperor in private, and they naturally led one to form an image of a bitter and petty person. But in reality, this was not the case.

Before Gu Yun had taken a single step into the room, the Longan Emperor had already ordered one of the eunuchs to fetch the brazier.

"I told them Imperial Uncle would come early. Come inside and warm up, I'm getting cold just looking at you."

The Longan Emperor called Gu Yun "Imperial Uncle," though in truth, this was not entirely suitable according to the rules of etiquette. Gu

Yun’s surname wasn’t Li, after all. It was one thing if the late emperor said such words while doting on him in private, but the current emperor kept up these intimate habits from childhood. He never put on airs around Gu Yun, treating him with warm and casual intimacy, as if this visitor wasn’t his subject, but his family.

“Little Chang Geng is here too.” Li Feng looked at Chang Geng, then sighed, “Young people really transform by the day—he wasn’t this tall the last time I saw him. I’ve only just ascended the throne, so I never have a moment of peace. I’ve been so overwhelmed with work these past few months that I never had a chance to give you any attention. Come, let your dage get a good look at you.”

Chang Geng had come prepared to be disdained. He never expected that the emperor’s disdain would be so subtle that he couldn’t sense it at all. In this Imperial City, all debts and grudges were hidden. At first glance, everyone liked each other, and all were in peaceful harmony.

Gu Yun and the emperor exchanged pleasantries and reminisced over some childhood tales. Eventually, the Longan Emperor took out some “New Year’s money” for Chang Geng.

As a country kid who’d grown up in Yanhui Town, Chang Geng was unfamiliar with the ways of society and the wider world. He only knew the rule “never accept pay without work.” As he heard Zhu Xiaojiao list off the expensive items one by one, he began to feel uneasy, and suspected that the reason Gu Yun had dragged him into the palace for such an early audience with the emperor was primarily so he could collect on rent.

The Longan Emperor amicably inquired about Chang Geng’s progress in his martial and literary studies, then said, “You’re a descendant of our Li family. You must be diligent and capable so you can share your Imperial Brother’s burdens when you’re grown. What does Chang Geng wish to do in the future?”

Chang Geng looked at Gu Yun, then said, “I want to become the marshal’s personal guard and serve by his side to expand our borders for Your Majesty.”

The Longan Emperor laughed uproariously and repeatedly praised Chang Geng’s ambition—it seemed he was quite pleased. Gu Yun picked up his cup of tea and sipped it to moisten his throat. He didn’t join the

conversation, but only grinned. His grin was so large the corners of his eyes curled up with it, warm as anything.

*And just who would be serving who?* Gu Yun thought to himself in fond exasperation.

He was mildly vexed, but also found these words pleasing to hear, their sounds unfurling as a coil of pleasure from his ears all the way to his heart. Even the bad taste left behind after seeing those monks was swept clean.

"You may say that now," the Longan Emperor continued in a lighthearted tone, "but a soldier's life on the borders is very hard. How could your yifu bear to let you suffer so?"

Gu Yun heard the emperor's implicit admonishment. "Of course if I dared bring the youngest prince onto the battlefield, as his elder brother, Your Majesty would never forgive me," he replied tactfully.

Satisfied, the Longan Emperor beckoned Zhu Xiaojiao over. "On his last visit, the foreign pope's envoy brought a large grandfather clock, even bigger than the rockeries in the Imperial Gardens. It's practically a small building, and every hour, puppets emerge to sing and dance—quite a lively little thing. Take Chang Geng to see something new; we will keep chatting with our imperial uncle."

Chang Geng knew they had business to discuss, so he graciously followed Zhu Xiaojiao out. Zhu Xiaojiao was exceedingly solicitous toward this well-educated fourth prince of complicated origins as he led him to the Warm Pavilion.

This "Warm Pavilion" was a half-enclosed garden. Its ceiling and walls were composed of colored glass tiles that swirled in the light, and the parts open to the air had steam braziers installed. The interior was warm as spring all year round, bursting with bright blossoms like a rich brocade.

The large grandfather clock the Longan Emperor had mentioned was dead in the center, like a piece of Western scenery that had barged into a mountainous landscape. Chang Geng was moved by the delicacy of the Westerners' craftsmanship, but couldn't quite appreciate those vividly colored paintings. After the novelty wore off, he quickly lost interest, and eventually his gaze fell on one corner of the Warm Pavilion in which he

glimpsed a familiar figure. It was the monk they had met on their way into the palace, Liao Ran.

Liao Ran couldn’t speak. He made a few swift gestures, and the novice beside him immediately came up to Chang Geng and offered a greeting. “Your Highness, Zhu-gonggong, my shishu and I were granted the honor of enjoying the Imperial Gardens by His Majesty. We encountered Prince Wei on the way, and Shifu stopped to speak with him, so we are waiting for him here. We hope we haven’t disrupted Your Highness’s leisure.”

“It is I who should apologize for disrupting the great master,” Chang Geng responded politely.

Liao Ran made a few more gestures. No matter what move he made, it was with a flowing grace like that of the immortals; he did not seem at all limited by his inability to speak. The novice explained from beside him, “Shishu says that he felt drawn to Your Highness at first glance, and that if you have time in the future, you should visit the National Temple, where you will be welcomed with fine tea.”

“Of course.”

Liao Ran reached a hand toward Chang Geng. Chang Geng didn’t understand what he meant to do, but after a moment of hesitation, offered his own hand in return.

Liao Ran grasped it and wrote in his palm, *Your Highness, do you believe in my Buddha?*

Chang Geng didn’t detest monks like Gu Yun did. He liked their aloof and peaceful disposition. But he had no faith, because he had no concept of what faith was. Since he didn’t understand it in the first place, there was no sense in discussing whether he believed or not. But Chang Geng didn’t want to reject Liao Ran outright, so he only smiled.

Liao Ran then indeed understood, but he didn’t become upset. Instead, a faint smile crept over his face, and he wrote word by word in Chang Geng’s palm, *Those who have not known suffering believe in no god nor Buddha. It is a good thing, a great fortune.*

Chang Geng started. The young man stared into the mute monk’s eyes, which seemed to contain every manifestation of nature within them,

and suddenly felt that the illness festering in his heart had been perceived in a single glance. All at once, wu'ergu, Xiu-niang, his mysterious origins, and his unspeakable desires all swept through his heart like flowing water and were pierced by those arrow-like words: "Those who have not known suffering believe in no god nor Buddha."

Liao Ran pressed his hands together in a bow and made to take his leave.

Chang Geng hurriedly called after him, "Great Master, I will call on you at the National Temple in the coming days."

Liao Ran smiled and drifted away with the novice trailing after him.

Just then, the time came for the clock in the Warm Pavilion to strike the hour. A light and lively tune began to play, and Chang Geng's head whipped around to see twelve small doors open on the grandfather clock and twelve tiny wooden puppets burrow their way out. Some played instruments, some danced, and some raised their voices in song. As the joyous melody ended, they bowed and turned to re-enter their little doors.

And all the festivities came to a halt.

After that day, Gu Yun left the estate even earlier and returned even later. The Longan Emperor intended to send him as Great Liang's representative to sign a trade agreement with the Western pope's envoy. A market had already been established along the border of the Western Regions, and if everything went smoothly, Great Liang could expand the trade routes even further. With this important matter now in his hands, he began preparations to leave right away. In addition to running back and forth from the capital to the Northern Camp several times a day, Gu Yun also had to deal with the Ministry of Revenue before he left, keeping a close eye on the amount of violet gold supplied to the army for the year. He was up to his neck in work.

On the sixteenth day of the first month, Gu Yun and Shen Yi returned late, as usual. Their departure had been set for the next day, and the pair had some things to discuss, so they returned to the Marquis Estate together.

"Why did His Majesty hand Jialai Yinghuo to us to escort too?" asked Shen Yi. "Are they not afraid we'll secretly execute that barbarian

crown prince on the road?”

Gu Yun laughed bitterly. “His Majesty rejected my request to increase our violet gold allocation this year. He said that the Lingshu Institute secretly obtained the design for a new type of mechanical puppet from the Westerners that can plow and plant fields in place of human farmers. It’s magical, like nothing else, and can increase output by a half for every acre. They are planning to deploy it starting in Jiangnan this year—and so that’s yet another expenditure of violet gold, and they really can’t spare any more. What could I say? How can the Black Iron Battalion snatch benefits away from the common people? His Majesty also said that the Black Iron Battalion is the valuable tool of the nation, so they could short anyone but us. So, the extra tenth of annual tribute that the barbarian tribes ceded would be given to us to make up the shortfall. You tell me whether I have the guts to do anything to that barbarian crown prince.”

The Longan Emperor’s intentions were clear. If a single hair on Crown Prince Jialai’s head was harmed, the Black Iron Battalion’s iron beasts would have no more violet gold to burn. Gu Yun would have to push them himself.

Shen Yi thought this over and had nothing to say. He could only laugh in anger.

As the two of them passed the iron puppets standing guard at the gate of the Marquis Estate, Shen Yi asked, “That’s right. Have you told the fourth prince that you’re leaving the capital tomorrow?”

Gu Yun rubbed his nose.

“What?”

Gu Yun lowered his voice and said into his ear, “I told him I was going to the Fragrant Hills with His Majesty, and I wouldn’t be back tomorrow night. If we see him later, make sure not to rat me out.”

After a beat of silence, Shen Yi sighed. “…Sir, you really have some guts!”

Gu Yun was having a hard time too. Ever since he accidentally dropped that slight hint that he might return to the border, Chang Geng had gone completely strange. Before, he had been diligent with his martial training, but now, he was dangerously reckless. Just yesterday he had

injured his wrist in the morning, and, heedless of the joint swollen to the size of a steamed bun, still went to practice archery in the afternoon. He had frightened his martial arts master to the point that the man appeared before Gu Yun to preemptively apologize every day.

Gu Yun felt that Chang Geng clung to him a little too much. Were other fathers and sons quite this…nauseating? He had no experience, so he wasn't sure. But he did feel that this little padded jacket of a son was a bit too snug. Wearing it made his whole body break out in a sweat—truly a comforting little burden.

The two of them strode into the Marquis Estate side by side. As soon as they entered the gates, they found that despite the late hour, the estate was brightly lit, and no one was asleep. A little girl dressed in gaudy colors barreled out like a firecracker and yelled over her shoulder, "Dage, Dage, the marquis is back!"

Gu Yun was shocked. *Since when was there a girl living in this estate? Did the willow tree at the gate cultivate into a spirit?* But upon closer inspection, the "little girl" was actually Cao Niangzi. He had dressed himself up in lavish attire as a little maiden—a little maiden who looked ready to joyously celebrate the New Year, at that.

Gu Yun was mystified. "What are you doing?"

"Chang Geng-dage said today is your birthday. He told everyone to wait for you to come home," said Cao Niangzi. "General Shen is here too! That's perfect, we can all have noodles together."

"Wonderful! I've come at just the right time!" Shen Yi enthusiastically approved.

As he spoke, he gave Gu Yun a meaningful look, adroitly conveying his message with his eyes—*Don't you feel guilty, you liar?*

# Chapter 26:
# Seeking the Buddha

IT WAS COMMON to make a big deal out of the birthdays of the old; this was called celebrating longevity. Young children's birthdays were also lively affairs, and this was because growing a year older was no easy feat, and with each year the little one's parents could be more assured of their survival.

Gu Yun was neither old nor young, and had no family to love him. If, on his birthday, he happened to be at home, the old housekeepers might remember to put on some small celebration for him. But most of the time, he wasn't at home. In fact, he'd been so busy that he himself had quite forgotten it was the sixteenth of the first month.

In all honesty, he had nothing much to celebrate. There was a saying: "Those born on the first become royal consorts, those born on the fifteenth become officials," meaning that the first was the best birthdate for women, while the fifteenth was the best for men. He could have been born on the greatly auspicious occasion that was the night of the Lantern Festival on the fifteenth, but he just had to stay in his mother's belly a few extra hours. It was clear that his terrible luck was innate.

Cao Niangzi had not only dressed up himself, but had also roped Chang Geng and the others into dragging the sword-training puppet

out and tormenting it too. They had painted a pair of rustic, ruddy cheeks onto that night-wandering spirit, and pulled out a few old lengths of silk from who knows where to truss up its iron limbs. Arrayed in this dazzling costume, the sword-training puppet held a bowl of noodles and stared blankly at Gu Yun, somehow conveying a put-upon expression on its motionless, pitch-black face.

Gu Yun cursed under his breath. "You little rascals, is this how you use the sword-training puppet?"

Ge Pangxiao bounded up to list everyone's contributions. "My lord, the fake girl drew the red cheeks, I lit the fire to cook the noodles, and Dage

cracked the egg to add to the noodles!”

Suddenly Gu Yun felt a bit awkward. The Marquis Estate, which had been cold and empty for so many years, now felt so lively he almost didn’t recognize the place.

“Yifu, eat your noodles, then come inside,” said Chang Geng.

“All right.”

Gu Yun picked up the bowl, looked at Chang Geng, then deliberately picked out the egg to eat first. He crunched down on a shard of eggshell on the very first bite, but didn’t let on, chewing up and swallowing the shell together with the rest. He emptied the bowl in a few bites like he hadn’t eaten in eight lifetimes and drank down every drop of soup as well.

Since the old days, the warmth of home was a hero’s grave. Before, Gu Yun had always left the capital without a single tie to bind him. Now, for the first time, he left with melancholy filling his chest. Maybe it was because every time before, he felt that the border was the place to which he returned. This was the only time he felt that he was leaving for a far-off journey, and that his home was here.

Alas—never mind this gentle melancholy, even a grief that tore his heart asunder could never hope to halt the steps of the Marquis of Order.

The next day, Gu Yun made his final preparations as if he had not a care in the world. In the end, he never said a word to Chang Geng. He arrived at the Northern Camp alone and turned back to look in the direction of the capital. It was a pity that, from such a distance, all he could see was the faint silhouette of Kite’s Flight Pavilion.

“Sir, finally discovered your conscience?” Shen Yi asked as he strolled up to him.

Gu Yun sighed. “The next time I come back, he might refuse to acknowledge me again. Ay, my title as yifu is always on the rocks…let’s head out.”

The Black Iron Battalion set off, its soldiers drawn up in strict formation, like a black whirlwind sweeping mercilessly across the land. Anyone would retreat before this show of force. The plan was to escort the

Tianlang crown prince north, then head straight west for the Western Regions to suppress desert raiders and ensure the safe and unimpeded flow of trade along the Silk Road.

The day after that, Chang Geng rose early as usual. He remembered Gu Yun wouldn't be home, but couldn't resist bringing the iron puppet to his empty courtyard anyhow. He practiced and exchanged strikes with the puppet alone, then ate breakfast alone. As he was leaving, he looked up and saw that the plum tree in the courtyard had blossomed.

It had just snowed, and the flower petals were coated in a thin, translucent layer of frost. The longer Chang Geng looked at them, the more he liked them, and eventually he couldn't resist the urge to snap off a few branches. His first instinct was always to save things for Gu Yun. Even though he knew his godfather might not return for a few more days, he still carefully swept away the frost and snow on the branches and went looking for a vase to display them in Gu Yun's room.

Gu Yun's room was so large, yet he didn't even have a single empty wine bottle to hold some flowers. Chang Geng opened the window and called to the old housekeeper, "Uncle Wang, is there a vase somewhere?"

The housekeeper acknowledged his request and went to look. Still clutching the plum blossom branches, Chang Geng waited in Gu Yun's room, looking this way and that. When his gaze fell on the head of Gu Yun's bed, he froze. The fox-fur coat that had seemed to raise the value of the whole room was gone.

Just then, Uncle Wang returned with a celadon vase in hand. He looked at Chang Geng and smiled. "Your Highness, will this do? Where should I put it?"

Chang Geng's gaze didn't budge from the bare headboard, even as it went a bit vacant. "Uncle Wang, why was the marquis's fox-fur coat put away so early?"

The corner of Uncle Wang's eye twitched a bit. "Hasn't the marquis gone on a trip with His Majesty?" he responded awkwardly. "He must have taken it with him."

Chang Geng's heart slowly sank.

On New Year's Eve, Gu Yun's Black Hawk told him the marshal never wore winter clothes inside the capital. He only sometimes wore warmer layers during snowstorms beyond the border. Even then, he had found it strange—if Gu Yun never wore winter clothes, why did he have a fox-fur coat hanging at his bedside? What was he planning to use it for? But things had been hectic back then—he was entangled by nightmares, his mind wasn't clear, so he hadn't thought about it in detail.

Chang Geng's head whipped around, voice creaking like a string stretched to its limit. "Uncle Wang, where did he go? Don't lie to me just because I don't like going out. I know the Fragrant Mountains aren't even as far as the Northern Camp."

Uncle Wang cradled the vase, not quite knowing what to do with himself. Gu Yun, their absentee leader, was well and gone, and he wasn't going to concern himself with that happened in his absence. The old housekeeper expected this encounter would happen eventually, but he didn't think it would be so soon.

Chang Geng sucked in a deep breath. "Has he already left for the border? Where? The north, or the west?"

The old housekeeper gave him a timid smile. "About that, this old servant doesn't understand much about military affairs… Your Highness, I think the marquis didn't want you to be worried…"

With a crack, the flowering branches in Chang Geng's hands snapped. He said slowly and with emphasis, "He's not afraid I'd be worried. He's afraid I'd insist on following him, isn't he?"

The old housekeeper shut his mouth.

Chang Geng was Gu Yun's ward in name, but no matter how disfavored he was, his surname was still Li. He'd be at least a commandery prince one day. The old housekeeper felt a surge of bitterness. That inconsiderate master of his must have gotten cold feet, and that was why he'd tossed a poor old man this hot potato. He braced himself to suffer the effects of this prince's temper.

But after several long moments, Chang Geng hadn't made a single sound.

Chang Geng kept all the screaming and yelling from his pent-up frustrations inside himself. It wasn't just Gu Yun's sudden departure without so much as a goodbye. This time, all the unease and anxiety he had contained within since arriving in the capital finally broke through the dam he had erected around it. Chang Geng's mind was as clear as a mirror. He always knew his existence was extraneous to everyone around him. He had been dragged into this swirling vortex, destined to become an insignificant pawn. Just as if he had fallen into that underground river in Yanhui Town, he would be helplessly swept along by the current.

But his eyes had been blinded by the contentment and joys of these past few weeks, this façade of peace. He had gotten greedy and wanted to hold on to a little something for himself. He had been lying to others and lying to himself, refusing to think about what would happen next.

*What do you even want?* Chang Geng asked himself. *You're simply hoping for too much.*

But he was kind by nature, and no matter what storms surged within his heart, he said not a word to the white-haired housekeeper before him.

The old housekeeper asked, trembling in fright, "Your Highness…?"

Chang Geng silently took the vase from his hands, carefully plucked off the broken stems of the branches, and settled the arrangement on Gu Yun's desk. He said quietly, "Thank you."

And then, he turned around and left.

The instant Chang Geng was clear of Gu Yun's room, he began to run, abandoning the sword-training puppet.

Chang Geng brushed past Ge Pangxiao, who was walking outside holding a violet gold tank he'd detached from who knows where. "Hey, Dage…" he called out in confusion.

Chang Geng acted as if he hadn't heard him. He swept past like a gale of wind and charged into his own room, where he locked the door behind him.

The thing Gu Yun liked most about this boy was that even when Chang Geng was overwhelmed with rage, he never took it out on uninvolved parties. Xiu-niang had made an undeniable contribution to this

virtue of his—the constant mistreatment to which she'd subjected him for over a decade had honed his astonishing restraint. But the wu'ergu that had been lurking in his body since childhood grew like a plant that needed to be watered with poison. Now, ever so slowly, it began to bloom with ghastly flowers.

Chang Geng couldn't breathe. It was like there was a giant boulder crushing his chest, and all the muscles in his body clenched like rusted iron machinery. His lower legs began to tremble.

His ears rang, and he was terrified to discover a mysterious, violent feeling surging in his chest. He unconsciously clenched his hands until his knuckles cracked, and for the first time, experienced the feeling of being gripped by a waking nightmare. Chang Geng felt the unmistakable sensation of some invisible hand rummaging around in his chest, crudely trying to scrub out every gentle emotion in his heart.

At first, Chang Geng was still lucid and able to wonder in fear, *Is this the wu'ergu? What's happening to me?* But soon, even the fear disappeared. His mind fogged, and he lost sight of where he was. Thousands of thoughts rushed through his head like the rising tide, and an indistinct bloodlust arose from nothing. At times, he'd think Gu Yun was gone, that his godfather didn't want him anymore, but then he would see Gu Yun standing before him, expressionlessly ridiculing him for being so weak and powerless.

Every negative emotion in Chang Geng's heart was magnified a hundred, a thousand times by the attack of the wu'ergu. In the throes of this torment, it was like Gu Yun was no longer the little yifu Chang Geng had stored away so carefully in his heart, but an enemy he hated to the depths of his soul, whom he wanted to grasp in his hands and humiliate with all his might.

Chang Geng's hand clenched the broken dart hanging from around his neck, a bloody cut appearing on his fingers from how hard he gripped the smooth-sanded edge. The clear spark of pain amid the endless numbness jolted Chang Geng awake, and he instinctively followed it out like a guiding light. His fingers dug into his own flesh, leaving a trail of raw, gaping wounds in his arm.

When the wu'ergu attack finally, slowly subsided, the sun had already begun to slant toward the west.

Chang Geng's clothes were soaked with cold sweat. His arms and hands dripped all over with blood, and he leaned, exhausted, against the door. He'd finally learned the true strength of wu'ergu, and only now did he realize how naïve he'd been when he'd thought the worst wu'ergu could do was give him nightmares.

This time, Xiu-niang had taken no mercy on him.

The old housekeeper had been waiting for him, yet Chang Geng didn't come out for so long and didn't even answer a knock at the door. The old man had been overcome with worry long ago, pacing back and forth outside the door and calling his name. This scrap of human compassion made Chang Geng feel a bit better. His eyelids flickered slightly, and a drop of cold sweat rolled down from his forehead to fall on his lashes, making it difficult to open his eyes. "I'm okay, I just need some time to myself."

“You haven’t eaten anything all day,” said the old housekeeper. “If the marquis were here, he wouldn’t be able to bear seeing you mistreat yourself like this—at least have a bowl of congee. Shall this old servant bring you some?”

Chang Geng was exhausted in body and mind. At the mention of Gu Yun, he grumbled to himself a few times before resolutely summoning the energy to call out, “Uncle Wang, it’s all right. If I’m hungry, I’ll go fetch some late-night snacks myself later this evening. Don’t mind me.”

Although his voice was weak, he sounded rational enough, so the old housekeeper had no good reason to coax him further. He could only wave at Cao Niangzi and Ge Pangxiao, who were both hovering in the vicinity along with the old servant who usually waited on Chang Geng. The group of them left reluctantly, glancing back every few steps.

Chang Geng sat leaning against the closed door. When he looked up, he could see the set of pauldrons Gu Yun had left hanging at the head of his bed. The armor was black as pitch and cold as ice, giving off an aura of hostility—yet its owner had left it there to chase his nightmares away.

He didn’t know how long he sat until the brazier in the room finally warmed his freezing body. Once Chang Geng recovered a little strength, he rose to clean up the mess he’d made of himself. He changed his clothes, retrieved some medicinal salve his shifu had given him when he’d injured himself training with the sword one day, and carefully applied it after washing his wounds clean. He took Gu Yun’s pauldrons down from the headboard and hugged them to his chest, then collapsed back on his bed.

He didn’t cry.

Maybe he didn’t have the energy, or maybe it was because he had just bled. After choosing to shed blood, a person often couldn’t manage to shed tears—there was only so much water in the body, and one had to take priority.

Chang Geng had just crossed blows with an enemy he was destined to be interlocked with for a lifetime. He had experienced firsthand the strength of his opponent and suffered a devastating defeat. But strangely, he wasn’t scared. It was just like that time in Yanhui Town when he had faced a barbarian warrior in Xiu-niang’s room all alone. He was gentle in demeanor, but nothing could hope to subdue him.

Oh…aside from Gu Yun, that was.

Chang Geng thought, exhausted, *I hate Gu Yun to death.*

He tried to put Gu Yun's pauldrons on his own shoulders. He had never worn armor before, so he didn't know if they fit or not, only that these things felt even heavier than he expected when pressed against his body. He drifted off, still wearing the armor—after all, he still had countless difficulties and obstacles waiting for him in his dreams.

The next day, Chang Geng declared he would be going out.

The entire estate was shocked—the scene of Marshal Gu carrying the fourth prince over his shoulder to drag him out of the house on New Year's Eve was still fresh in everyone's minds.

Gu Yun's exact words had been: "Delay him for three to five days. By then, we'll have crossed the Seven Passes and reached the northern border. He won't be able to catch up to me at that point, so he'll settle down."

But it hadn't been three to five days. Afraid Chang Geng was about to order him to prepare the horses and give chase, the old housekeeper said carefully, "Your Highness, the Black Iron Battalion is no ordinary troop of soldiers. They travel fast on foot, and even the finest steed wouldn't be able to overtake them. And…the army doesn't allow civilians. This was a rule set by the former marquis, you see…"

"Uncle Wang," Chang Geng replied evenly, "I have no intention of running after them and causing trouble. I am not an unruly child."

"Then, where are you…"

"I wish to visit the National Temple and call upon Great Master Liao Ran. I told him I would come."

The old housekeeper's expression once again became complicated. If the marshal came home to discover that while he was away, the little prince had turned traitor and run off to the monastery…he scarcely dared imagine Gu Yun's reaction. Wasn't that practically the same as getting cuckolded?

But the most urgent thing right now was cheering up the marquis's godson. There was nothing the old housekeeper could do, so he gritted his

teeth and allowed it, summoning a row of guards to escort the youth to the National Temple as if preparing for war.

Arriving like this, it was like they were coming to challenge the monks to battle.

Liao Ran had already prepared tea, and didn't look the least surprised to see Chang Geng, as if he had long anticipated his arrival. He amiably invited him to sit, poured him a cup of tea, and had his novice bring out a brush, paper, and a brazier to dispose of the scraps, getting ready for a long discussion. It had scarcely been half a month since they met, but Liao Ran discovered that the confusion and anxiety between this young man's brows had evaporated. He carried himself with a dignified calmness and resolution, like a pupa that had struggled free of the first layer of its chrysalis in the process of its metamorphosis into a butterfly.

Chang Geng thanked him graciously, then accepted the tea and took a sip, only to nearly spit it right back out.

When they last met, this monk told him he would be welcomed at the temple with good tea. That must have been purely a pleasantry, because the stuff he had brewed was like no tea Chang Geng had ever tasted. It was so bitter it hurt his tongue, and had none of the fragrance of tea.

"What is this?"

Liao Ran wrote with a smile, *Kuding. It clears the eyes and encourages circulation. It can also calm anxiety and assist sleep.*

Chang Geng considered for a moment, then said, "Isn't that the same as gualu? I've had some at the Marquis Estate before, I seem to remember…"

*It not being quite this disgusting.*

Liao Ran's brush moved over the paper, *That is the variety with small leaves. This is the variety of gualu with large leaves.*

"Large leaves" sounded rather impressive, and Chang Geng was about to praise it along those lines, when the monk displayed his honesty and continued writing, *The kind with large leaves is cheaper.*

Chang Geng could think of nothing to say.

He studied the monk’s teacups. The cups were of good quality, and they were washed very clean, but they had inevitably become battered with use. Quite a few of them were chipped along the rim.

*This monk’s residence is simple and crude. I beg Your Highness’s forgiveness,* Liao Ran wrote.

In Chang Geng’s eyes, the entire capital was fantastically decadent. It was like everyone was rich, and the whole city was filled with extravagant amusements. The Westerners said the capital of Great Liang was paved with gold-plated tiles, and this wasn’t far from the truth. But for some reason, all the people Chang Geng knew were broke. Shen Yi went without saying—he had the bitter melon face of someone whose family had been poor farmers for decades. And Gu Yun had a whole estate, but the thing was an empty shell. Not to mention how he’d so eagerly dragged Chang Geng off to the palace first thing New Year’s morning to sponge off the emperor. And now he sat before Liao Ran, who served tea in cups with chips on the rim.

“The National Temple receives plenty of offerings, yet the great master is content with simplicity. You are truly someone who cultivates a path above worldly concerns.”

Liao Ran smiled and wrote, *This monk has wandered all over the world and become accustomed to poverty. My apologies for mistreating an honored guest.*

“I heard that you have ridden the iron dragons to foreign lands in the West. Did you go to spread Buddhist teachings?” asked Chang Geng.

*My talents are few and my learning is superficial. I dare not mimic the eminent traveling monks of old. I travel only to see the world and its people,* the monk wrote.

Chang Geng took another mouthful of kuding, finding it more and more bitter the longer he savored it, with no sweet aftertaste at all. He swallowed it down in disappointment. “I grew up in a small border town, and I never crossed its small frontiers. After I came to the capital, I rarely left the Marquis Estate. Perhaps I’ve been too content in my small corner of the world. But I’ve always felt that all the joys and sorrows of the world were about the same, and if I invited in those of others, I would have no room for my own.”

*If your heart contains only a corner,* wrote Liao Ran, *worries the size of a house must be squeezed into a corner. If your heart is as large as the world, worries the size of a mountain will be no more than a drop in the ocean.*

Chang Geng froze in surprise for a long time, watching Liao Ran place the sheets of used paper into the brazier one by one and burn them to ash.

“Great Master, that day you said to me, ‘Those who have not known suffering believe in no god or Buddha.’ Now I have known suffering, and I have come to call on the gods and buddhas. Please provide me with guidance.”

ARC 4
DRAGON
THREAT

# Chapter 27:
# An Elopement

PERHAPS SOME MYSTERIOUS DEITY delivered Marshal Gu a reminder from far across the continent, telling him that his son was about to get snatched away by a bald donkey. Either way, a month after the Black Iron Battalion departed, Gu Yun actually remembered to send home a personal letter for Chang Geng along with his report to the emperor.

The handwriting Chang Geng had copied countless times spilled out across a sheaf of pages. First, he made an earnest apology, then explained why he had left without a goodbye, using appeals to both logic and emotion, before finally expressing his longing for home and promising that, as long as everything remained peaceful in the northwest, he would make it back to the estate by the end of the year for the New Year's celebrations.

Chang Geng read the letter through to the end, then set it aside with a faint smile. Even if he were thinking with his toes, he'd still know this wasn't a product of the Marquis of Order's hand. Such nauseatingly sentimental phrases like "separated by thousands of miles, I am anxious by day and sleepless by night," and "eat plenty and stay warm, do not add to the worries that trouble my soul" absolutely could not have sprouted from the fields of Gu Yun's mind. Those long-winded lines were the clear mark of Shen Yi's work.

At the most, his bastard godfather had copied it over in his own hand.

Yet Chang Geng was dismayed to discover that despite his clear understanding of the truth, the mere thought that these lines had flowed from Gu Yun's brush made him want to dig every word off those pages and embed them into his eyes.

Unfortunately, when the end of the year came, Gu Yun went back on his word.

Knowing he was at fault, Gu Yun kicked Shen Yi out so he wouldn't make more careless promises on his behalf and took up the challenge himself, finally managing to write Chang Geng a long and shitty letter of

apology. Chang Geng laughed in anger after reading it, even though he felt that this time, the letter was quite sincere. Gu Yun really had no talent for cajoling people, so the end result was nothing but an exceptionally sincere gust of wind to fan the flames of Chang Geng's indignation.

Marshal Gu opened with a three-page ramble on miscellaneous trivialities he found interesting, managing to wander ten thousand miles off-topic within a thousand words. Only at the very end did he stiffly tack on the five-word phrase "I'm busy with military affairs" to summarize why he couldn't return to the capital. Chang Geng didn't care about the best way to roast desert scorpions for the tastiest results, but even after he searched from beginning to end multiple times, he was unable to find the answer to the question he cared about most: if Gu Yun wasn't coming back this year, when would he be back?

But after that "I'm busy with military affairs," there was nothing else. Instead, he had appended a long catalog of gifts. Gu Yun must have felt that a written apology was insufficient, so he expressed himself with actions too—he shipped all the nice things he received that year back to the Marquis Estate and stuffed them all into Chang Geng's hands, everything from shining jewels to worthless trinkets.

That day, fifteen-year-old Chang Geng shut himself in his room and endured a wu'ergu attack with a Loulan dagger sent by Gu Yun for company. When it had passed, he made a decision—he didn't want to stay in the Marquis Estate like a useless good-for-nothing, and he didn't want to learn the armchair version of literary and martial arts from an old scholar and his always-terrified shifu. He wanted to walk out on his own two feet and see the wider world.

On New Year's Day, Chang Geng went to the palace escorted only by Zhu Xiaojiao to give his well-wishes to the emperor, going through the usual motions. He lingered in the Marquis Estate until the sixteenth of the first month, when he had the kitchen make a bowl of longevity noodles that he brought back to his room and ate himself. Then, he calmly announced a decision that once again detonated the entire estate.

"I'm planning to stay at the National Temple for a while."
Chang Geng declared.

Taking in the old housekeeper's ghastly green face, he added, "Uncle Wang, don't worry, I'm not planning to become a monk. I just want to join Great Master Liao Ran in his practice for a while and pray for Yifu."

The old housekeeper said not a word. What could he say? He prepared the money for offerings and endured the pain in his chest as he sent someone to lead Chang Geng, Ge Pangxiao, and Cao Niangzi to the temple.

The old housekeeper of the Marquis Estate thought those imposing gates at the entrance must be cursed by some barbarian sorcery. Every single child who crossed through those gates, whether born to the family or taken in from outside, was more trouble than the last. The old housekeeper still remembered what Gu Yun had been like as a child. Back then, he was like an injured wolf pup with an indiscriminate grudge against everyone around him.

That one managed to stumble his way to adulthood and could finally stand firm on his own. Yet now, here came a child who was even more incomprehensible!

After Gu Yun left, Chang Geng began to spend his days at the National Temple. This half-grown teenager could have made any other friend, yet he insisted on running to the temple at every opportunity. It was one thing when the Fourth Prince Li Min didn't leave the house, but now when he did, his destination was truly uncommon.

The old housekeeper's intestines twisted into knots in anxiety, fearing every day that Chang Geng was going to take the tonsure. But he also knew that fifteen- and sixteen-year-old boys were notoriously resistant to the advice of their elders—not to mention, he hadn't raised Chang Geng himself, so he didn't dare interfere directly with the boy's decisions. Instead, he made his appeal to Cao Niangzi and Ge Pangxiao.

When Cao Niangzi heard what the old housekeeper had to say, his eyes bugged out so hard he nearly dislodged the powder on his eyelids. "What?! That bald donkey is trying to lure my Chang Geng-dage into becoming a monk?"

In this world, decent-looking men were as rare as phoenix feathers and unicorn horns. The marshal had left without a word, and no one had seen hide nor hair of him since, so Chang Geng was all Cao Niangzi had

left. Chang Geng had reached adolescence while narrowly avoiding showing any signs of growing up ugly—how difficult a feat that was! Yet now there was a risk he'd end up bald. Thus, the old housekeeper rapidly gained an ally.

The next day, Cao Niangzi specially changed into men's clothing and shamelessly insisted on witnessing the Buddha's holy ground with Chang Geng. As he strode out the door, he made a show of rolling up his sleeves before the pair of iron puppets at the gate, signaling his determination to succeed. The iron puppets weren't equipped with human emotions, and woodenly watched his back as he slithered away like a snake spirit.

But when they returned from the National Temple that evening, Cao Niangzi never mentioned "making that wicked monk reveal his true nature" ever again. Rather, he determinedly joined the daily Buddhist study party… for no other reason than that the "wicked monk" was entirely too handsome.

The marshal was handsome enough, but he was too intense. He couldn't just sit still and let people admire his face. But Great Master Liao Ran was different. Cao Niangzi thought he was practically a walking lotus flower. If you put him in a potted arrangement, his beauty would be immortalized for a hundred generations, and a single glimpse would be enough to leave one relaxed and joyful for days.

The old housekeeper didn't know what love potion Liao Ran had slipped first one, and now two, of these children, so his only option was to recruit Ge Pangxiao. Bound by duty, Ge Pangxiao began to accompany Chang Geng and Cao Niangzi.

A few days later, Ge Pangxiao also turned traitor.

It turned out that Liao Ran not only knew how to recite scriptures, he was also extremely well-versed in many varieties of violet-gold-powered machinery and puppets. Ge Pangxiao had even bumped into some members of the Lingshu Institute while visiting him. For the sake of his dreams of flying a giant kite into the sky, Ge Pangxiao aligned himself with the monk's lotus seat without another word.

So it was that after a whole year, the old housekeeper had become quite used to Chang Geng and the others running off to the temple every few days and now paid it little mind. He never expected that the one thing the fourth prince would learn from Gu Yun was how to make his escape.

The day after Chang Geng arrived at the National Temple for his extended stay, he left without saying goodbye.

He first told the guards escorting him that he would be entering closed-door cultivation with Great Master Liao Ran for a time, and that no one should disturb them. Of course, the guards didn't dare, and stayed put outside the door. That same evening, Chang Geng gathered up his two traitorous hangers-on and went off on an excursion to Jiangnan with Great Master Liao Ran.

A few days later, when the guards realized something was amiss and came in search of their charges, all that was left in that monastic cell was a brief letter written on a single sheet of paper.

The old housekeeper wanted to cry, but he couldn't find the tears. He could only send someone to bring a memorial to the emperor and have someone else deliver a letter to Gu Yun.

The emperor's attitude upon receiving the news was decidedly open-minded. First of all, he didn't care overly much for this discount baby brother of his, and second of all, he was a devout Buddhist and had a blind faith in Liao Ran. Hearing that Chang Geng had gone traveling with him, he was even somewhat envious—how unfortunate that he was tied down by worldly affairs and couldn't himself enjoy the enrichment of the eminent monk's presence.

Gu Yun was even further out of reach and couldn't be counted on. The desert raiders in the Western Regions were as numerous as hairs on an ox, and heaven only knew where he'd run off to in pursuit of them. Even if the letter reached Xiliang Pass without incident, locating Marshal Gu himself would be entirely up to luck.

Half a month later, heedless of the Marquis Estate, which was currently exploding like oil in a hot pan, three teenagers and a monk sat around a table in a little tea house in Jiangnan.

The spring planting season in Jiangnan had already begun. But as they looked out from their seats, they spotted very few people toiling in the fields. A couple of old farmers in conical bamboo hats leisurely watched the iron puppets hard at work. Unlike the menacing-looking guardian and

sword-training puppets in the Marquis Estate, these iron puppets planting the fields in the spring rains weren't humanoid, but were fashioned to look like a little cart with a wooden ox head on top. Hustling back and forth in the fields, these puppets looked rather cute.

This was the first batch of farming puppets sent by the court to be tested in the Nanjing region.

Liao Ran rapped on the table to regain Chang Geng and the others' attention. After knowing him for over a year, they had come to understand his sign language, so the monk no longer needed to write every word by hand.

"I have seen the farming puppets Jiangnan is introducing here in the West before," he signed. "A single puppet can easily manage a whole acre of land by itself. Although they do need to burn a bit of violet gold, after some improvements, most of their power can be supplied by coal. This way, the cost to operate them is very low. Supposedly, such a puppet is even cheaper than an altar lamp."

"Why, that's a good thing, isn't it?" said Ge Pangxiao. "From now on, people won't need to rise early and retire after dark to work the fields."

The court had provided the puppets being trialed here to the local government of Nanjing, where country gentlemen of the region registered to claim them and took responsibility for their maintenance. If their tenants wished to farm the land themselves, they could, but if they didn't, they could give the land they rented up to the puppets. At harvest time, these tenants would pay an extra tenth on their rent to cover the cost of the coal and the small amount of violet gold burned by the puppets.

Very few people participated the first year. After all, they would have to pay an extra tenth on their rent. But by the second year, the practice had already begun to spread—the folks saw that these things really were more efficient than people, and even after paying the extra rent, they were still left with a higher yield than before. And they didn't need to work from dawn to dusk. Who could pass up such a good deal?

This was the reason for the grand sight of Jiangnan's unpeopled fields. Liao Ran smiled but didn't sign anything further.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily a good thing,” Chang Geng cut in. “If iron puppets can replace people completely, what use are people? The land the tenants rent belongs to the country gentleman. For the first few years, perhaps, they’ll be willing to keep these idlers around for the sake of old ties, but how long will that last?”

Ge Pangxiao was entranced by all sorts of engines, dreaming of them day and night. He piped up, “The farmers can stay and become artificers!”

“I know the answer to that one,” said Cao Niangzi. “All the steel armor of the defending troops in Yanhui Town put together needed no more than two artificers to maintain, and they only ever asked for Shen-xian… General Shen’s help on occasions when they were overwhelmed. There isn’t a need for that many artificers.”

“They can find other things to do, like…” Like what, exactly, he was unable to say for the moment. The butcher’s family had lived decently well back then, and to Ge Pangxiao, there were plenty of other things to do in the world besides farming fields.

Cao Niangzi struggled to peel his gaze from Liao Ran’s face. “Then, if everyone has no work, or most have no work, will they revolt?”

Liao Ran looked down at him, and Cao Niangzi’s face promptly went boiling red. “Not yet,” Liao Ran signed.

The three teenagers fell silent for a while. Then Chang Geng asked, “Is it because of my yifu?”

Liao Ran looked at him with a smile.

“The New Year’s Eve before last, when the Westerners’ tiger escaped and the streets fell into chaos, everything settled down after people saw my yifu.” Chang Geng paused, then continued, “Later, I heard people say that with such a huge crowd around Kite’s Flight Pavilion, if my yifu hadn’t intervened, many of the spectators would have been trampled to death.”

“Bringing Your Highness out without permission, I must have terribly antagonized the Marquis of Anding,” Liao Ran signed. “Once the truth comes to light, I hope Your Highness will save this monk’s meager life from under the marquis’s sword.”

Both Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi laughed, thinking Liao Ran was making a joke—after all, their impression of Gu Yun was that he was always pleasant and amiable. Liao Ran smiled too with difficulty and changed the subject. “The people still tell tales of how the old marquis once compelled the Northern Wolf to bow its head with only thirty Black Carapaces. They all see the Black Iron Battalion as godly soldiers with a godly commander, omnipotent and impenetrable. With a great rafter beam like the Black Iron Battalion holding up the nation, even if there are rebels bold enough to defy the government, it will be difficult for them to amass sufficient momentum.”

Chang Geng sat up straighter. “But I’ve heard people say that to demolish a house, the first thing to do is destroy the rafters.”

Liao Ran looked at the young man sitting across from him. If Gu Yun returned now, he probably wouldn’t even recognize Chang Geng. In the short span of a year, he had shot up several centimeters, and the childish set of his brows had disappeared entirely. The boy whose entire scalp had prickled at the thought of going out on New Year’s Eve now sat in a tea house among the fields of Jiangnan, discussing the world and the lives of the people with a monk.

“Your Highness need not worry. The marquis is well aware of these matters.”

Chang Geng thought of the calligraphy stating “The World Is Inescapable” hanging in Gu Yun’s room and flinched slightly. A wave of longing at once welled up in his heart like it had burst through a dam. He sat quietly for a moment, allowing that longing to surge and subside, then picked up the cup of tea root brew on the table and, with a self-mocking laugh, drained it dry.

The object of Chang Geng’s longing was currently deep in the vast deserts of the Western Regions, where he’d been in a standoff with the largest gang of desert raiders for over a month.

By now, Xiliang Pass was no longer as uninhabited as it had been in the past. Ever since Great Liang signed the Xiliang Pass Agreement with the pope, the whole region had become an auspicious land where the riches of the world came to gather. Merchants and travelers quickly flocked there,

and the populations of the surrounding towns swelled. Westerners, Central Plains people, and residents of all the small nations in the Western Regions lived hip-to-hip and shoulder-to-shoulder, practically fused together like doting lovers.

With its prime location at the entrance to the Silk Road, the small nation of Loulan in particular became a trading hub, and quickly transformed from an unknown little piece of earth into a land flowing with gold. The people of Loulan were joyful and passionate, content to live and work in peace, and didn't like to make trouble. They hadn't played any part in the Western Regions' rebellions in the past and had always maintained friendly relations with Great Liang. Thus, it was no accident that the emperor placed the entrance to the Silk Road here.

"Sir, Xiao-Jia and the others have captured the thieves' lair. Shall we act now?" asked Shen Yi.

"What are you waiting for? After we bag their leader, we'll go cadge a meal from the Prince of Loulan tonight!" As he spoke, Gu Yun lightly pressed a hand against his eyelids.

"Are your eyes…" Shen Yi spoke up.

"No," Gu Yun muttered, "But my eyelids keep twitching. Maybe…"

Before he could finish, one of his personal guards strode up, retrieving a letter from his lapels. "Sir!"

"Where's this from?"

"A personal letter from the Marquis Estate, sir. It arrived at Xiliang Pass, but they couldn't find you, so they got a Loulan courier to deliver it here."

*Maybe it's a reply from Chang Geng*, Gu Yun thought, tearing it open with eager expectation.

Shen Yi saw Gu Yun's face go dark. "What is it?"

"That bald donkey Liao Ran best not find himself in my hands," Gu Yun ground out. He paced a few laps around the commander's tent with his hands behind his back like a headless fly, then abruptly kicked over his writing desk. "Summon a few Black Hawks. Jiping, you take charge of things here for now."

# Chapter 28:
# Jiangnan

"WHAT?" asked Shen Yi.

"I'm going to Jiangnan."

Shen Yi cried out in pain. "Aiyo…my chin crashed into my feet, my poor toes—are you insane? 'The commander of the defending army on the northwest front deserts his post without permission to go on a private errand to Jiangnan…' Are you trying to get yourself killed or start a rebellion?!"

"After we wipe out the Desert Scorpion's nest today, it should quiet down for the next few months," Gu Yun replied calmly. "At the Black Hawks' speed, we'll be in Jiangnan in a day or two, and I won't stay long; I'll be come back as soon as I find them."

Shen Yi took a deep breath, readying a veritable cascade of words, but before a single one could leave his mouth, Gu Yun elbowed him right in the stomach. Shen Yi yelped and doubled over. "I haven't even said anything!"

"One must be on guard against all eventualities."

That night, thirteen Black Steeds rode from the depths of the desert to break the long standoff and capture the leader of the raiders and his henchmen in a single strike. When Gu Yun heard the report, he gave the order to haul them all in and left that very night without taking a moment to rest. The Prince of Loulan, Ban'eduo,

had prepared plentiful food and wine, and was standing ready to treat the weary Black Iron Battalion to a feast upon their arrival. But no sooner had they arrived than he saw Gu Yun changing into Black Hawk armor, his face full of unaired grievances.

Loulan was situated in a key location at the entrance to the Silk Road. Its citizens were children of the desert, and they despised the rampant desert raiders. Over time, the Loulan people had become the Black Iron

Battalion’s best guides as they trawled the desert suppressing raiders, and the two nations enjoyed a rather friendly relationship. The people of Loulan were skilled in song and dance and loved good wine. Both their men and women were avid drinkers—and their prince was the most avid of them all. Neither Marshal Gu’s inscrutable stratagems nor his extraordinary martial prowess impressed Ban’eduo, but the man greatly admired Gu Yun’s alcohol tolerance, which allowed him to drink hard liquor like water. He had already declared himself Marshal Gu’s “friend in feasting,” and carried out this self-appointed duty to the utmost.

Ban’eduo drawled and whined in a tone almost like the singing wanderers of the desert, “Marshal Gu, why are you leaving as quickly as the clouds flit across the horizon today? Are you off to pursue a girl like the setting sun?”

Shen Yi didn’t know what to say to that. What did it mean for a girl to be “like the setting sun”? Red and round?

“I’m off to chop someone to pieces.”

“Oh!” Still holding two jars of wine, Ban’eduo started in surprise, then muttered, “You just finished chopping, and now you’re chopping more?”

“Do you not eat dinner at night after you’ve had breakfast in the morning?” Gu Yun raised his voice, his tone murderous. “Step aside!”

Black Hawks swooped in like dark shadows. They alighted behind Gu Yun, then disappeared again in a blink of the eye like a dark whirlwind, leaving only sensuous curls of white smoke in their wake. Ban’eduo watched their forms disappearing into the distance and asked Shen Yi with a voice full of admiration, “The marshal has to chop people to pieces three times a day?”

Shen Yi beckoned him to lean in and whispered in his ear, “Someone took off with his son.”

Ban’eduo wrapped his arms around himself in a dramatic bear hug. “Oh! She must be a girl just like the full moon!”

“…No, just a shiny head like the full moon.”

Leaving Prince Ban'eduo groping his own head in confusion, Shen Yi turned back to the camp with a heart full of worries. After a few steps, his face drained of color—shit, Gu Yun left in such a rush. Did he even remember to bring his medicine?

Jiangnan welcomed a sand and dust-covered Gu Yun with a mild drizzle barely heavy enough to wet one's clothes. He stopped for few minutes to rest and regroup before taking his men and charging right into the estate of the Regional Judiciary Commissioner of Yingtian, Yao Zhen.

Given Gu Yun's position, there should have been no reason for him to have any friendly connections with the local officials of Jiangnan. But there was an old story here. The first time Gu Yun went out with the miliary to engage raiders when he was fifteen, he saved a few unfortunate bastards who were being held hostage by the ferocious bandits. Yao Zhen, an official who had been framed, dismissed from his post, and sent home, was one among them. Later, Yao Zhen was reinstated, and became the Regional Judiciary Commissioner of Yingtian. His and Marquis Gu's relationship was a friendship between gentlemen: cordial, and neither sought to gain anything from the other, but they had always kept in touch.

It just so happened to be Commissioner Yao's day off, so he had slept until the sun was high in the sky. When his servant brought him the news, his entire body froze in shock.

"He said he was *who*?"

"He said his surname was Gu, Gu Zixi."

"Gu Zixi?" Yao Zhen brushed away the crust at the corners of his eyes. "The Marquis of Order, Gu Zixi? And I'm this dynasty's Senior Grand Secretary—how are you falling for such a con? Drive them out!"

The servant acknowledged his order and turned to leave.

"Wait!" Yao Zhen sat up, still clutching his blankets, and mulled it over for a moment. "…Just wait a moment. Perhaps I should go take a look."

With a fortuitous spark of realization, he suddenly thought that abandoning his post without leave might be exactly the kind of thing Gu

Yun would do.

At this time, Liao Ran, who also happened to be in Yingtian Prefecture, had yet to realize the catastrophe hanging over his head. This monk was stingy practically to the point of zen. He broke every large coin into two, and if there was a broken-down temple to sleep in, he'd never stay at an inn. He subsisted on chaff and wild herbs, and relied on alms for every good meal—or, as it was more commonly known, begging.

He wouldn't spend money, and absolutely refused to let Chang Geng and the others spend theirs either. Fortunately, these three half-grown teenagers could all withstand a little hardship, and stuck by him in his wanderings despite never knowing where their next meal was coming from.

Liao Ran's travel plans were extremely off-the-cuff. Sometimes, he took them wandering in the streets and alleys between ordinary city dwellers' homes, and sometimes he wandered aimlessly between the fields. He was indiscriminate as to where he asked for alms. They'd visited the homes of country gentlemen and philanthropists, as well as ordinary tenants, accepting whatever they were given. Once, they visited a childless elderly person living alone, and seeing that they really had nothing to spare, not only did they not get a meal, they actually left some money behind for their host.

"People freeze and starve to death even in peaceful and prosperous times, and people luxuriate in power and riches even in times of turmoil," Liao Ran signed to Chang Geng and the others as they wove their way through the market in a little town. "The term 'the way of the world' should be split into two parts. 'The way' is the direction in which people's hearts point, and 'the world' is a single grain of rice beneath the twinkling lights of a city, a single brick in an endless stretch of city wall."

"Great Master, you were meant to renounce worldly affairs," said Chang Geng, "for even when you speak of 'the world,' your explanations always lead one to see 'the way.'"

Chang Geng was nearly taller than Liao Ran at this point, and his voice had entirely lost the crispness of youth. It was a bit low, and he spoke at an unhurried pace, giving one an impression of steadiness. He was quiet by nature, and though he used to feel uncomfortable all over when he saw

dense crowds, at some point, he had cultivated the ability to make his way anywhere as if he were strolling idly through a spacious courtyard.

Perhaps because he was determined to break himself down and remake himself, some of these minor vexations had naturally become inconsequential over time.

Liao Ran smiled serenely and signed, “If a monk does not know the way of the world, how can he claim to have renounced it?”

Liao Ran had an extraordinarily compelling face. When he was scrubbed clean, he looked like an eminent monk aloof from the dust of mortal affairs; when he hadn’t bathed for days, he looked like an eminent monk who had overcome worldly tribulations. The all-encompassing aura of the Buddha glowed from his bald head, and his limpid eyes pooled with the desire to deliver all living beings from suffering. Now, if he were only a bit more generous with a certain square-holed, metallic worldly possession,[24] Chang Geng and the others would truly have considered him an eminent monk through and through.

Cao Niangzi suddenly interrupted this eminent monk and whispered in a hushed tone, “Stop with the metaphysical sparring, Chang Geng-dage. Haven’t you noticed all the people looking at us?”

The four of them—a monk, a refined and elegant young master, a puffed-up nouveau riche kid, and a young girl who, while pretty, seemed a little off—were an extremely conspicuous party in the first place. They were long accustomed to being watched, and even Chang Geng was no longer so sensitive to the eyes of passersby.

But this time, the attention seemed rather too much. When the townspeople saw them, they all stopped to stare, and not only did they stare, they also pointed and whispered among themselves.

“I feel like something is about to happen,” Ge Pangxiao muttered.

“You’re right,” said Chang Geng.

As the tallest of the four, Chang Geng had already peered past some of the onlookers’ heads and spotted a notice affixed to a nearby building. The notice featured a realistic portrait of a handsome, bald-headed monk with delicate features. Written beneath it were the words:

*The man pictured above has impersonated an eminent monk of the Temple of National Protection and committed, among countless other evil deeds, the wretched crimes of fraud and deception. A warrant is hereby placed for his arrest, with a reward of ten taels of fine silver for any individual who reports relevant information.*

"Great Master Liao Ran," said Chang Geng. "You're worth ten taels of fine silver."

Liao Ran stood unmoving, like a living portrait of a beautiful monk.

"My yifu must have received news from Uncle Wang and sent people to harass you." Chang Geng cast a sidelong glance at the crowd, which was beginning to roil in pursuit of those ten taels of silver, and turned to Liao Ran. "My apologies. Let's be on our way."

"Amitabha Buddha, Your Highness, don't forget the promise you made in the teahouse," Liao Ran signed rapidly. Then the monk up and ran as if the bottoms of his feet were coated in oil. The man was truly a stunning example of one who could stand as still as a stone yet run like the wind.

Seeing that they'd alerted their prey, all the common folks in the market eager to obtain those ten taels of silver threw caution to the wind and rushed in from all sides with cries of "Depraved monk!" and "Liar!"

"This is exactly what my dad and the others did when they went up the mountain to hunt rabbits," Ge Pangxiao remarked.

Chang Geng and Cao Niangzi gave him a look.

"Brandish sticks and yowl, trying to scare the rabbits into such a panic they'd hurl themselves into the waiting nets—what, I'm serious."

Great Master Liao Ran was much smarter than the rabbits. He didn't panic. He had already gotten a sense of the layout of the market in this little town, and he darted left and right, moving so fast his figure was a blur. Who knew how he calculated his route, but with a few back-and-forths, he had tangled the people chasing him from all sides into a knot, clearly fully in his element.

Shouts of "Move aside!" sounded from a short distance away. A squadron of prefectural troops had arrived, likely here to make the arrest

after receiving someone's report.

*So Gu Yun really is the one behind all this*, Chang Geng thought to himself. He was partially comforted, yet partially irked. It was comforting to know that even if Gu Yun was far away in the northwest, he wouldn't leave him to fend for himself completely. Gu Yun's methods were a bit nasty, but at least this meant he was thinking of Chang Geng in his absence. At the same time, Chang Geng felt he had made too much trouble for Great Master Liao Ran.

What's more, that man didn't even show his face at the estate for the New Year, so why was he sticking his nose in this business all the way out here *now*?

Cao Niangzi grabbed his sleeve. "Dage, what do we do?"

Chang Geng extracted himself from his conflicted thoughts, and after a moment's consideration, reached into his traveling bag. He grabbed a handful of loose silver ingots, took aim, and tossed them out like a heavenly maiden scattering flowers. "Money! Catch!"

It was fortunate that Liao Ran had run off and wasn't paying attention, or his heart would have ached so terribly fresh hair would have grown from his head.

All the people pursuing the monk were shocked silly after being smacked in the head with money, and immediately bent down to pick it up. Hearing there was cold, hard money right here, the others gave up on that fleet-footed prospect of silver and all turned back to snatch the real thing. The crowd formed a snarl of bodies, solidly barricading the soldiers behind them. By then, Liao Ran was long gone.

Chang Geng smiled. "Let's go too."

He took the lead to slip through a gap in the crowd, planning to escape unnoticed from the scene of the crime. But before he could get away, hoofbeats rang out from the other end of the alley. Any closer, and the rider would cut them off and trap them within the crush.

Anyone riding a horse toward a busy market was either there to stir up trouble or to catch a fugitive.

"Dage, let's escape through the alley," Ge Pangxiao suggested.

“It’s hopeless,” Cao Niangzi said woodenly. “Let’s just accept our fate.”

The approaching hoofbeats stopped precisely at the entrance to the market. A few military men dismounted their horses and arranged themselves into a neat line, and in the center was…someone Chang Geng would recognize even if he turned to ash—

Chang Geng was thunderstruck. No one could have expected Marshal Gu to rush back from the northwest to catch them himself.

Gu Yun had thought his plans through on the way here. First, he was going to flay Liao Ran alive. Then, he was going to catch Chang Geng and give him a proper spanking. Saplings must be trimmed to grow up straight, and he figured he’d spoiled this child too much before. It seemed that every bit of gentleness he’d learned from the late emperor had indeed been useless—he’d have to mimic the grouchy old marquis to be a father after all.

But the roaring conflagration of rage in his chest sputtered out the instant he laid eyes on Chang Geng.

Gu Yun nearly failed to recognize the young man from his seat on horseback. Teenage boys change by the day. In Yanhui Town, he was always watching over Chang Geng, so the signs of his growth weren’t obvious, except from the ever-shortening hems of his pants. But after a separation of over a year, these gradually accumulating changes had transformed this young man into someone completely unrecognizable.

His height had caught up to the tall and slender Gu Yun, and his thin body had filled out into an adult’s lean figure. The look of disbelief on the young man’s face flashed by for only an instant before it was covered up by his newly learned composure.

Gu Yun allowed his horse to stamp in place for a moment, thinking to himself expressionlessly, *Looks like I can’t spank him anymore.* It wasn’t that he couldn’t get the better of the boy, but since Chang Geng now had at least the appearance of an adult, disciplining him like a child would no longer be discipline, but humiliation.

The years blended together to Gu Yun—they all passed swiftly by, each without any special meaning. But in this moment, he belatedly

understood the mercilessness of time. He had looked away for merely an instant, and his little Chang Geng had grown up in a rush. The days he had missed would never return.

It dawned on Gu Yun that Chang Geng was fifteen, nearly sixteen. In three or four more years, he would move to the Prince Yanbei Estate and leave the shelter of Gu Yun's spread wings. What was three or four years? Maybe just enough time for him to make one more trip back to the capital. After that, would the only thing left between them be a passing connection?

After one whole year, Marshal Gu finally managed to wrap his head around this thorny issue.

Dismounting from the horse, he walked straight up to Chang Geng and said with a stormy expression, "Come with me."

Chang Geng's gaze was fixed on Gu Yun, unwilling to move even an inch. There was a shallow wound on his neck, a souvenir from the deserts of the Western Regions. It hadn't yet fully healed.

Chang Geng found his voice with difficulty. "Yifu, why are you here?"

Gu Yun scoffed coldly, then led the way out of the market without another word. *Even the sound of his voice has changed,* he thought to himself, dismayed.

The prefectural soldiers who had accompanied him jogged over, bouncing eagerly up to Gu Yun. "Sir, that monk managed to escape. Should we give chase?"

"Yes," said Gu Yun, "Spread the warrant through the town. Even if he jumps into the sea, fish him back up!"

"Yes, sir!"

Behind them, Cao Niangzi surreptitiously tugged on Ge Pangxiao's sleeve. Ge Pangxiao stuck out his tongue. In this, they were like clay Buddhas trying to cross a river—they couldn't even ensure their own well-being, so even if they had the desire to help, they hadn't the ability. Ge Pangxiao could only shake his head and hope Great Master Liao Ran could fend for himself.

Chang Geng and the others followed Gu Yun all the way to the estate of Commissioner Yao, the Regional Judiciary Commissioner of Yingtian. Fully prepared to flatter his unexpected guest, Commissioner Yao brought his staff out to welcome them at the gate. “Your Highness the fourth prince has graced this modest abode with his presence, bringing honor to my humble home! Please, come in. I have prepared good food and excellent wine to receive Your Highness.”

Before he was done speaking, Gu Yun had already stalked inside with a face as gloomy as the King of Hell. Two sentences were written all over his face—*Receive whom? Just let him starve.*

Gu Yun couldn’t manage to figure out how to talk to Chang Geng that entire evening. He could only drink cup after cup of the Loulan wine he brought from the border alone in his room. After a while, someone knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Chang Geng gently pushed the door open and stepped inside. “Yifu.”

Gu Yun was silent, his expression unreadable. Chang Geng closed the door behind him and ducked his head slightly, as if it was taxing to look at Gu Yun for too long.

“Yifu, I missed you very much.”

Gu Yun gazed at him for a moment longer, then finally sighed. “Come here. Let me get a look at you.”

Chang Geng obediently went. There was a scent of unfamiliar wine surrounding Gu Yun. It was slightly sweet, perhaps the smell of a wine from the Western Regions. He wore the ever-present cold iron pauldrons on his shoulders. Chang Geng had thought he would be able to remain in control before his godfather, but he had overestimated himself—just like how he hadn’t anticipated Gu Yun would come look for him in Jiangnan himself.

He sucked in a breath, then impulsively stepped forward and embraced Gu Yun.

# Chapter 29:
# Dragon Threat

ALL OF GU YUN'S TEMPER melted away in an instant.

He returned Chang Geng's embrace and patted him on the back a few times. When his chin brushed against Chang Geng's shoulder, he could feel that those shoulders were no longer a rack of bones solid only in appearance. Gu Yun wanted to be direct and tell him, *I missed you as well*, but the words rose and fell in his chest, and in the end caught stage fright, fleeing back into his belly.

Instead, he offered him a faint smile. "How big you are now, yet you're still trying to act cute."

Chang Geng closed his eyes. He knew he couldn't push these boundaries any further. Emotions couldn't be controlled, but one's limbs and body could be kept in check. He smoothly released Gu Yun and stepped back, allowing the invisible wildfires to rage away inside his chest. He knew he wanted too much, unreasonably much. He felt all manner of resentment and anger because of these desires—every single one was ugly and despicable, so he didn't dare let the barest trace of them show.

Chang Geng sucked in another deep breath, then asked, "Why have you come to Jiangnan, Yifu?"

Gu Yun shot him a glare and retorted huffily, "You still have the face to ask? Isn't it all because of you?"

Chang Geng didn't dare stare at him too long and lowered his head ever so slightly.

Gu Yun thought he had spoken too harshly. The scolding that had risen to the tip of his tongue was hurriedly swallowed back down. He clenched his thumb in the palm of his hand, rubbing it joint by joint a couple times. Only now did the fatigue from his long journey hit him. Pushing through the sudden onset of weariness, he considered his words a few times, then spoke in as even a tone as he could muster. "Sit. Tell me why you went off with that bald…" he coughed.

Gu Yun realized that calling Liao Ran a “bald donkey” in front of Chang Geng might not be the best choice of words, but it was impossible for him to call him “great master.” He was stuck.

Chang Geng took a quick glance at his expression, then explained, “Great Master Liao Ran was planning a journey down south. It was I who insisted on coming along. I’ll feel terribly guilty if Yifu causes trouble for him because of my actions.”

This child was too good with words. He knew how to make excuses for that bald donkey, and also knew how to do it without angering Gu Yun, sketching the details of the situation in just a few words. Gu Yun nearly felt “terribly guilty” right along with him. For the second time, he was privately surprised. It had only been a year—where had the kid who was as blunt as a wooden club learned to speak with such eloquence?

“When Yifu was my age, you had already gone south to quash rebellions and fight raiders, yet I have no literary nor martial accomplishments to speak of. So I wanted to leave the estate and see the outside world.” Chang Geng snuck a glance at Gu Yun and saw that his eyes had gone bloodshot. He couldn’t bring himself to go on; the ocean of guilt overflowed from his chest to his throat. He added lowly, “…But my methods were willful, and I’ve made Yifu go to all this trouble. I was wrong. You should punish me.”

Gu Yun fell silent for a spell. Then he said, “The first time I joined a military campaign, it was actually old General Du and all the old marquis’s men who went to the late emperor and insisted.”

Chang Geng’s head shot up.

Gu Yun wasn’t especially modest, and often rambled boastfully when he was drunk. He had bragged about all sorts of nonsense to the tune of “I could knock twenty iron puppets flat within half an incense stick’s time with my eyes covered and my ears plugged.” But come to think of it, Gu Yun’s glorious history encompassed making his name as a youth, assuming command of the Western Campaign, and rebuilding the Black Iron Battalion. Any one of these accomplishments would have been enough to brag about for a lifetime, yet Gu Yun never mentioned them.

Gu Yun set out another cup and poured Chang Geng a measure of the mildly sour wine. “This is the Loulan people’s wine. You’re grown now,

you can have a few sips."

Chang Geng took a sip, but didn't taste anything special in the flavor, so he set it to the side. He hadn't seen Gu Yun in a long time and just looking at him already made his blood rush. He really didn't need the assistance of wine.

"Back then, I didn't understand anything at all." Gu Yun said slowly. "I was just getting in the way, but I was also young and arrogant, and refused to humble myself and admit my flaws. While we were pursing raiders, there was a time I was too rash and acted on my own. I made a serious blunder and lost more than thirty suits of heavy armor paid for in hard-earned silver and gold. And because of me, old General Du was seriously wounded…have you heard of General Du Changde?"

Chang Geng had heard Liao Ran talk about him. That monk knew the literary and martial officials of current and previous dynasties as well as he knew his own family treasures, and perhaps even better than he knew the Buddhist scriptures. Over a decade ago, the old Marquis of Anding and his wife had passed of illness one after the other while Gu Yun was still young. It was old General Du who had taken charge of the situation, holding his own at the borders and in court. He later died en route to the northwest when he suffered complications from his old injuries—and that was how Gu Yun became the commander of the Western Campaign at the tender age of seventeen.

Gu Yun sighed. "If not for me, he would have stayed in top shape. He would never have succumbed because of a mere cold. When the army returned after suppressing the raiders in the south, the old general didn't say a word about my mistakes in his memorial to the court, but only praised my achievements. This memorial kept me in the army."

At this point, Gu Yun paused for a moment. How did he end up here? He'd spent the whole journey thinking he'd teach Chang Geng a lesson when he caught him and pondering all kinds of methods, from a verbal to a physical beatdown. Yet it had somehow transformed into him sitting down and telling the young man about his own disgraceful past. He thought he'd be loath to discuss these events, but digging them up now, he found he could face them with open honesty.

This genuinely exceeded his understanding of himself. Perhaps Shen Yi was right. To an old father, a young child really was a heavy burden—enough to force a person's head down and make them take a good look at themselves.

"I hold this position not because I'm better than anyone else, but because my surname is Gu." Gu Yun looked at Chang Geng. "Sometimes, your birth determines what you must do, and what you must not do."

For the first time, Gu Yun explained to Chang Geng face-to-face why he couldn't take him to the northwest—even if the explanation was rather obscure.

Chang Geng returned his gaze, not moving an inch.

After a moment of deliberation, Gu Yun continued, "But if you truly know what kind of road you wish to walk, you shouldn't worry too much. So long as I'm alive, I'll have the strength to sweep any obstacles from your path."

Chang Geng had thought that in his time with Liao Ran, he had cultivated a mouth that dared to open and speak with any kind of person. Only now did he discover that "any kind of person" still excluded Gu Yun. With Gu Yun, he was awkward and tongue-tied. He'd always considered himself a burden the late emperor had tossed into Gu Yun's hands, a greedy person who coveted a life that didn't belong to him. But now, he discovered that wasn't the case at all.

Chang Geng thought to himself then that no one would ever treat him the way Gu Yun did.

A figure appeared at the door. "Sir."

Gu Yun collected himself and waved at Chang Geng. "Go get some sleep. I'm sure you've had nothing good to eat and nowhere good to rest with that monk—oh, or do you want to stay here and sleep with me?"

The inside of Chang Geng's head exploded like an array of fireworks, and his face went bright red.

Gu Yun laughed at him. "So you've learned to be embarrassed too? Wasn't it always me who coaxed you back to sleep before when your nightmares frightened you to tears?"

Chang Geng had no idea how to handle this slander uttered right to his face—and the worst part was, Gu Yun had spoken so frankly, it sounded like such a thing had actually happened!

This young man who was mature beyond his years at once lost all his fire and fled from Gu Yun's room on unsteady steps.

Only after Chang Geng was out of sight did Gu Yun beckon to the person outside the door. "Come in."

The soldier in Black Hawk armor promptly entered at his command. "This subordinate followed orders to pursue that monk…"

Liao Ran's offense of absconding from the capital with the youngest prince was egregious. But as the group had already been found, it wouldn't do for Gu Yun to offend the National Temple too deeply, especially when Chang Geng had already spoken up in their defense.

"Forget it. Tell Chongze to rescind the arrest warrant. Just say it was a misunderstanding, and I'll treat the Great Master Liao Ran to a vegetarian meal someday in the future."

"Chongze" was Yao Zhen's—Commissioner Yao's—courtesy name. And even though Gu Yun claimed the matter was settled, if Liao Ran had any wits at all, he'd never dare show up for that meal. Gu Yun had his own ways of making sure the monk wouldn't be able to swallow so much as a single sip of water while sitting across from him.

Yet unexpectedly, that Black Hawk confessed quietly, "This subordinate is incapable. I have not yet located that eminent monk. However, earlier this evening, I caught sight of him boarding a ferry, and when I went to search it with the prefectural soldiers, we discovered this."

As he spoke, he removed a small bundle of cloth from his lapels. He carefully unrolled it to reveal a strip of cloth stained with a trace of golden powder. Accepting the bit of fabric from the soldier, Gu Yun took only a single glance at it before his brows furrowed into a frown.

He knew this substance very well—it was called "shattered heart," an ore that appeared in tandem with violet gold. In its powdered form, it could be mixed into violet gold at a certain ratio to prevent the volatile fuel from

accidentally igniting during long transports. Once the cargo arrived at its destination, one simply used a special method to filter it out of the violet gold. It was a very convenient solution.

But when the government transported violet gold, they either flew it on giant kites or took the official roads, with soldiers from the local garrisons along its path escorting the shipment. Why would such a thing appear on a ferry that even a monk could sneak onto?

“You didn’t disclose this to anyone, did you?”

“Of course not, sir.”

Gu Yun stood up and paced a few steps around the room. “Let’s do this then: Don’t rescind the arrest warrant for now. Tell outsiders that I will have that monk captured no matter what. Take the others and keep a close eye on that ferry. I want to know where it came from and where it’s going…”

At this point, Gu Yun’s words ground to a halt. With a start, he realized his vision was going blurry. A double image, neither heavy nor light, was beginning to take shape around the figure of the Black Hawk.

*Damn it,* Gu Yun cursed to himself, keeping his outward expression even. *I left in too much of a hurry; I didn’t bring any medicine.*

No wonder he’d had the niggling feeling he’d forgotten something. How could that freeloader Shen Yi not remind him!

“Sir?” the Black Hawk asked in confusion.

Gu Yun picked up where he’d left off as if nothing was amiss. “If we can, let’s try to identify the owner of the boat. Watch closely to see who the people on that ferry interact with throughout the day.”

“Yes, sir!” Reassured, the Black Hawk turned to leave.

“Wait, one more thing.” Gu Yun stopped him. “If you find that monk, bring him to me, but keep it secret.”

The Black Hawk strode off with his orders. When he had gone, Gu Yun turned up the gas lamp on the table and sat down, unmoving.

Jiangnan didn’t produce violet gold. If there really were something on those ferries, there were only two possible sources—either some official

in Jiangnan was scalping it in secret, or it came from overseas. The former was easy enough to deal with. Jiangnan was a rich region, far from the emperor's sphere of control. It would be a simple case of someone taking advantage of the introduction of the farming puppets to skim off the top for personal gain. The Judiciary Commissioner and Supervisory Commissioner would handle the culprit, and he wouldn't have to intervene.

But the latter would be far more complicated.

None of the eight branches of the Great Liang military were weak, with the Carapace and Hawk Divisions being the strongest among them. Their dominance was the result of three generations of the Lingshu Institute's blood, sweat, and tears. In terms of equipment, they were in no way inferior to the Far Westerners, who excelled in their strange technological tricks.

Only the Dragon Division was an exception.

Although Great Liang's Dragon Division was nominally designed for naval battles, it usually only served as coastal defense and rarely ventured into the open sea. Their vessels couldn't compare to the Westerners' giant ships with their enormous sails that could ride the wind and slice through the waves. It had always been so—even back when maritime trade routes connected all corners of the world, the ships docked at the coastal harbors were nearly all of Far Western origin. In those days Emperor Wu was on the throne, and Great Liang, overflowing with power and riches, cared little for trade with these Western barbarians. It was always the Westerners themselves who scurried all the way out here for gold.

Back then, "establishing trade" meant the other party delivering the goods right to the nation's doorstep. Then Great Liang would deign to open up the harbors, reluctantly accept the Westerners' trinkets, and award them a bit of pocket money in return. In the times of the late and current emperors, Great Liang had enjoyed the profits of maritime trade, and was enthusiastic about the idea of increasing them. Yet because the northwestern border had never known peace, the project to upgrade the nation's coastal defense to include great dragons capable of crossing the sea had always been put off. It wasn't for a lack of money, but for a lack of violet gold to provision it.

If those ferries really contained privately scalped violet gold, they were likely a clear and present risk to coastal defense along the East Sea. Had Liao Ran unintentionally led them to that ferry, or was this part of some premeditated plot?

In the brief time it took for all these thoughts to pass through his head, Gu Yun's vision had gotten even blurrier. He fumbled around in his lapels and pulled out that glass monocle, setting it on his nose as a stopgap measure. This way, at least he could see a little bit out of one eye.

Gu Yun barked out a dry laugh. *What now?*

Chang Geng's feet barely touched the floor as he fled back to his own room. His heart was still pounding when he opened the door and found a ghastly-pale monk just inside. His heart leapt right back up into his throat, and he hurriedly pulled the door shut behind him. "Great Master Liao Ran, what are you doing here?" he whispered urgently.

Liao Ran raised his joined palms to him with a smile—*Amitabha Buddha, there is nowhere this monk cannot go.*

This monk seemed to have learned to make himself invisible. He came without a shadow, left without a footprint, and could even walk right into the Regional Judiciary Commissioner's estate—this man truly did seem like a divine being. He signed to Chang Geng, "The Marquis of Anding will surely let me go this time, you needn't worry."

Chang Geng wasn't worried about him. His mind was sharp, and after just a few moments of thought, he grasped what was going on. "Did you use me to lead him here on purpose? What exactly is going on in Yingtian Prefecture?"

Liao Ran looked at him appreciatively, and slowly began signing again. "The fey flood dragon in the East Sea has been cultivating into an imperial dragon. This monk has come to deliver a heavenly tribulation."

What was he trying to say? An imperial dragon—did Prince Wei plan to revolt? Or was it something else?

A number of thoughts flashed through Chang Geng's mind in an instant. He had known this monk was involved in mortal affairs, but he

never expected he was involved to this degree. He looked at Liao Ran with a new hint of wariness. But before he could question him further, Liao Ran motioned for him to follow and nonchalantly jumped out the window. Chang Geng hesitated for only a moment before grabbing his sword and chasing after him.

# Chapter 30:
# Condensed Fragrance

CHANG GENG FOLLOWED in Liao Ran's footsteps to the outskirts of the city. By the time they arrived, the night was already dark, and the streets around them had fallen silent. Even the noise made by the wooden cart that sounded the night watches inside the city had faded into the distance. Chang Geng stopped and called out to the person in front of him. "Great Master Liao Ran, please slow down."

Liao Ran paused.

When Chang Geng spoke, his voice was measured, and there was no sign of anger in his bearing. He was mild and polite, just the same as when he quietly drank kuding in Liao Ran's room in days past. The only difference was his hand, which was resting on the hilt of his sword, ready to draw his blade and skewer the monk through at any time.

"Great Master, you and I have shared many intellectual discussions these past days, and I have learned a great deal. I have also come to understand that your heart is filled with concern for this whole world, and you are not someone content to stay within the monastery walls discussing the Buddha and the Dao. Our Marquis of Anding has marched unhindered throughout the land, a celebrated general of this generation—but no matter what pedestal the nation and the world may place him on, to me, he is a loved one I can depend on unreservedly in times of need. I am a nobody with few capabilities, and my sword is barely enough to hold my own in this world. I am powerless to intervene in major events, and my heart is only large enough to contain my concerns for the Marquis Estate and a few other people. Great Master, I hope you understand."

Liao Ran was stunned. He didn't know how Chang Geng usually spoke to Gu Yun, but to outsiders, he was always three parts speech, ten parts implication. Liao Ran thought he had witnessed the full extent of this ability, but he never expected anyone in the world could say something so murderous as "fellowship is fellowship, but if you dare touch a hair on Gu

Yun’s head, I’ll slaughter you on the spot” in such a refined and erudite manner.

Liao Ran looked down at his monk’s shoes, which were so stained after a day of running around that it was impossible to discern their original color. He signed, “Your Highness, you are a descendant of royalty and there is benevolence in your heart. You will make your mark on the world. There is no need to hold yourself in such little regard.”

Chang Geng’s expression remained placid and unmoved. “If a man living in the world cannot even manage the little plot around him, what need is there for him to cast his gaze so far?”

Liao Ran shook his head and laughed. Seeing that Chang Geng wouldn’t be so easily led astray, he had no choice but to solemnly sign, “Marshal Gu is a pillar of the state. Pull one thread, and the whole will unravel. How would this monk dare harbor any ill intent?”

Chang Geng’s hand did not move from his sword. “But you did in fact lead my yifu here on purpose.”

Liao Ran’s face grew serious. “Please follow me, Your Highness,” he signed.

Chang Geng gazed at him for a moment, then lifted his sword again and smiled. “It seems I must trouble you to lead the way and dispel my doubts, Great Master.”

*And if you can’t dispel them, I’m still going to skewer you.*

Liao Ran peeled off his robes and flipped them inside-out. His white monk’s attire, which looked like someone’s mourning clothes, unexpectedly had two sides, and the inside was black. After draping them over himself and covering his head, the monk disappeared into the darkness.

A suspicion floated to the surface of Chang Geng’s mind—thinking back, they hadn’t seen Liao Ran change his clothes this whole journey walking from the capital to Jiangnan. Was it really a layer of black cloth on the inside of his robes, or did he just never wash them, and turned them inside-out to keep wearing once one side turned black?

At that thought, Chang Geng’s skin began to crawl. He practically couldn’t walk side by side with this eminent monk anymore!

Draped in this “nighttime camouflage,” Liao Ran led Chang Geng along a winding path through Jiangnan’s numerous, tightly packed bridges and across flowing water. Before long, they reached a pier on the inland canal. A waterway between Great Liang’s external seaports and the canal had been constructed long ago, and the coastline and the canal ran in parallel. The inland journey by boat was swift, and this convenience had once made the waterfront along the canal into a wealthy district. Because taxes here had risen the past few years, however, the place was beginning to seem rather desolate.

But a starved camel is still larger than a horse. It was already late in the evening, yet merchant ships and sailors were still bustling about on the pier.

Liao Ran signaled for Chang Geng to stop, then signed, “The Black Iron Battalion has already planted scouts up ahead. Don’t get any closer.”

Chang Geng shot him a glance, then took out a field scope and peered toward the water. The pier was peaceful, with sailors and porters coming and going. On the shore, some soldiers from the Jiangnan garrison were inspecting cargo. He couldn’t see any of the Black Iron Battalion’s people, nor could he see anything abnormal on the water.

Chang Geng’s trust of Liao Ran was thin at the moment, so he kept his questions to himself and instead began to silently observe. The sailors were transporting cargo stored in thin wooden crates onto the ship. Before they could be loaded into the hold, the lid of each box was opened, and the boxes were placed on a gear-operated conveyor belt so the garrison soldiers on guard could inspect them. The boxes would then be transported to the other end of the pier, where a few sailors were waiting to seal up each crate and carry them on board.

When they had passed through a few days ago, the locals had mentioned that inspections of the merchant ships working the sea and canal ports in this region usually weren’t so strict. It was only because the court had granted Jiangnan a large shipment of violet gold for the farming puppets that inspections had tightened up to prevent petty criminals from scalping the goods.

Just then, one of the crates was opened for inspection, and Chang Geng’s nose wrinkled involuntarily even from hundreds of meters away.

“What is that smell?”

Liao Ran wrote on the tree next to them, *Condensed fragrance.*

“What?” Chang Geng started.

“Your Highness has lived in the Marquis Estate all this time,” Liao Ran signed. “The incense you used there was likely imperially granted. You aren’t familiar with the cheap goods that commoners use. They take the remnants from a large batch of aromatic materials and compress them into an oil or cake. The scent is extraordinarily strong, so the cakes are stored in three layers of sealed jars to prevent the smell from leaking through. To use it, you take out a small amount and dissolve it in warm water, and it retains its scent for several months at a time. One cake of condensed fragrance is only the size of your thumb, but it can easily be used for eight or ten years, and costs as little as one string of coins.”

The compressed fragrance was excessively strong, and in large quantities, any fragrance became pure stink. Chang Geng’s head was beginning to ache from the smell, so he didn’t have the wherewithal to correct the monk’s misapprehension—the Marquis Estate never used incense, and their clean clothes only ever smelled of soap pods.

Chang Geng raised the field scope to examine the merchant ship and saw a man’s silhouette flit through his field of view. His hair ornaments and clothing were unlike those of the Central Plains. Thinking of the tales Liao Ran had told them of his travels overseas, he said, “I think I just saw a Dongying man like the ones you’ve described. This must be a merchant ship heading for Dongying… What do the Dongying people want so much condensed fragrance for? Are they going to boil it and eat it?”

Liao Ran gave him an approving look.

The crates of condensed fragrance snaked out in a long line like a winding dragon, and four or five large ships, immersed in darkness on the water, were waiting to take them on. It was even more impressive a sight than the fleet of merchant ships transporting fresh seafood docked beside them.

If a single cake of condensed fragrance could be used for eight to ten years, why would anyone buy this much? Never mind the tiny archipelago

of Dongying, even the entire citizenry of Great Liang might not generate enough demand to clear these ships.

The garrison soldiers began to tear up at the overpowering stench and covered their noses with handkerchiefs, urging the sailors to move their cargo along as quickly as possible. The soldiers had a dog with them to assist with the inspection, but it had already been overwhelmed and was lying off to the side, unmoving.

“Great Master,” Chang Geng asked quietly, “if you could enlighten me, what is the garrison’s dog there to detect?”

“That is a canine inspector,” Liao Ran signed. “Violet gold has a faintly fresh and bitter scent. Ordinary humans can’t smell it, but dogs’ noses are very sensitive. Violet gold is an essential commodity. When Emperor Wu gave strict orders to clean up the black markets for violet gold, canine inspectors made a great contribution. They are still in use today.”

The canine inspector’s eyes had rolled back in its head from the stench of cheap condensed fragrance. Never mind violet gold, at this point it wouldn’t even be able to smell a meaty bone.

“So you suspect this Dongying fleet has some ulterior motive, and lured my yifu here to investigate?”

Before Liao Ran could so much as nod his head, Chang Geng pressed, “Then, if I may be so bold as to ask, how could you know our marquis would come in person? Not to mention, this should be Yingtian Prefecture and the Jiangnan Garrison’s responsibility. Even if he deserted his post to come here, how could you be certain he would interfere? Why haven’t you gone to the Regional Supervisor of Yingtian, or the Regional Judiciary and Supervisory Commissioners? Why have you insisted on seeking help from afar, setting up this elaborate plot to draw him here from the northwest?”

Liao Ran was still for a moment. He had thought Chang Geng would be too shocked upon encountering such a far-reaching conspiracy on his first solo journey far from home to look too deeply into the surrounding details. He never expected that Chang Geng wouldn’t be very shocked at all. He’d only frowned once this whole time, and now he was insisting on getting to the bottom of Liao Ran’s story.

The monk couldn’t help but recall the rumors of how Gu Yun had retrieved this child from the little town of Yanhui back then. It was said that the fourth prince’s adoptive mother had orchestrated the barbarian rebellion in Yanhui Town, and that the prince’s choice of justice over family had allowed the Black Iron Battalion to defeat the barbarians in one fell swoop.

But how old had Chang Geng been back then? Twelve or thirteen at most…

Liao Ran suddenly very much wanted to ask, *During the unrest in Yanhui, did you kill anyone?* But after a moment, he swallowed the words back down, because he felt there was no need to ask. Chang Geng looked back at him placidly. There in the moonlight, Liao Ran saw twin shadows within Chang Geng’s eyes. He knew Chang Geng had a unique wisdom and maturity beyond his years, but he’d assumed it was a sensitivity born of his sudden change in status at a young age, as well as his dependence on the charity of others in the capital. Only now did the monk realize that this young man had likely seen a darkness known to no one else.

He suspected even Gu Yun did not know.

Liao Ran’s attitude turned cautious. He considered his words for a moment, then deliberately signed, “I knew he would come, and I knew if he came, he would definitely intervene. The implications of this incident are too wide for a tiny little place like Yingtian Prefecture to handle. I’m sure the marquis shares a tacit understanding with us on this matter.”

Chang Geng narrowed his eyes, keenly picking up on that suggestive *us*.

At that moment, a *whoosh* of wind sounded behind them. Before Liao Ran could react, Chang Geng’s sword, which had hung by his side until now like an ornament, left its sheath with a screech of metal, an instinctive reaction honed by countless matches with the iron puppet. The blade, bright as snow, collided with a black-iron windslasher. Chang Geng recognized the newcomer as a Black Hawk, and both combatants lowered their weapons and stepped back at the same time.

Upon seeing whom he’d crossed blades with, the Black Hawk gasped in surprise and dropped to one knee. “This subordinate has committed a grave sin. My apologies for disturbing Your Highness!”

“What’s going on?” asked Chang Geng.

“The marquis ordered me to bring the great master back for a discussion,” answered the Black Hawk.

Chang Geng’s eyebrows, which had only just lowered, shot up once again. Gu Yun wanted to see Liao Ran in private? And what did Liao Ran mean by “shares a tacit understanding”?

Liao Ran readily removed his ridiculous headcloth and offered the soldier a dignified bow in greeting. His body expressed, *In that case, I will impose on your hospitality* even more clearly than he could have with words.

When they returned to Yao Zhen’s estate, Gu Yun sent someone to take Chang Geng back to his room, and he never found out what Gu Yun said to Liao Ran.

Early the next morning, a Black Hawk knocked on his door. “Great Master Liao Ran will resume his travels, and the marshal must return to the northwest. He has tasked this subordinate with escorting Your Highness back to the Marquis Estate. Please inform me when you are ready to depart.”

If they hadn’t witnessed that strange fleet of Dongying merchant ships at the canal ferry crossing the previous night, Chang Geng might have almost believed him. But before he could speak, they heard a light rap on the wooden banister at the other side of the hallway. The Black Hawk turned and saw that the odd mute monk had appeared behind him at some point. Liao Ran made a “wait” gesture to Chang Geng, straightened his clothes, and pushed open Gu Yun’s door.

The Black Hawk and Chang Geng were both astonished—the monk hadn’t even knocked!

If not for the fact that the entire Marquis Estate knew that Gu Yun hated those bald-headed monks, Chang Geng would have suspected these two had some sort of significant relationship.

Likely afraid he’d be beaten back out, Liao Ran didn’t step through the open door, but bowed at the person inside from the hall.

Gu Yun, for his part, didn’t bite the monk’s head off. He only said in a somewhat impatient tone, “Great Master, what advice do you bring?”

“Marshal,” Liao Ran signed, “hawk chicks don’t grow up in golden cages. Besides, you are short a few of the attendants you will need to avoid suspicion. Why don’t you bring His Highness with you? The late emperor left His Highness the title of Commandery Prince Yanbei, and in a year or two, it will be time for him to make his debut at court.”

“Great Master, you interfere rather too much,” Gu Yun replied frostily.

Liao Ran suddenly stepped forward across the threshold. He must have signed something to Gu Yun that the others couldn’t see, because inside the room, Gu Yun fell silent.

Cao Niangzi whispered from behind Chang Geng, “What does that mean? Is the marshal going to bring us along?”

Chang Geng’s heart began to pound. With Gu Yun’s temperament, he would never agree to bring them along—Chang Geng was certain of this. He thought he would have to choose between following Gu Yun in secret and acting on his own, or being obedient and going back to the capital so as not to make him worry. He had never for a single moment thought Gu Yun would actually choose to bring him.

The wings of hope ignited in his chest, and sweat coated his palms. He’d scarcely been this nervous when facing off against the barbarians in Yanhui Town. Finally, he heard Gu Yun sigh. “Fine, let them come. But they’re not allowed to leave my side, and we follow the plan as previously discussed.”

Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi, who had no idea what kind of excursion they’d been signed up for, howled with joy. Chang Geng looked down and coughed lightly, pushing the silly smile that had crept up back off his face. At the same time, another question rose in his heart—what had Liao Ran said to Gu Yun? Was there really someone in this world who could convince his godfather to change his mind?

Not long after, a ratty carriage set off toward the outskirts of the city.

The driver was a monk, and inside the carriage sat a frail and scholarly young master along with two servants and a maid. The Black Hawks accompanying Gu Yun had vanished from sight.

Chang Geng couldn't resist taking another look at Gu Yun. He had shed his armor and changed into a set of robes with wide sleeves and a high collar to hide the injury on his neck. His hair was unbound and spilled over his shoulders in a sensual and unruly manner, as if in mockery of the bald-headed driver. A strip of black cloth covered his eyes. With the upper half of Gu Yun's face hidden, Chang Geng was dismayed to discover that his attention inadvertently lingered in the vicinity of his young godfather's pale lips. The only solution was to direct his gaze at the floor to avoid staring.

"My lord, why are you dressed like that?" Ge Pangxiao couldn't help asking.

Gu Yun tilted his head toward him meaningfully, pointed to his own ears, and deadpanned, "I'm deaf, don't talk to me."

Ge Pangxiao didn't know what to say.

What a tyrannical deaf man.

Who knew whose lousy idea it was, but Gu Yun's plan was to finagle himself onto those condensed fragrance ships in the guise of a fragrance expert. Some professionals believed using all five senses would impair the faculty of smell, so they would blind and deafen children in their youth and raise them to get by with their sense of smell alone. Fragrance experts raised in this way were believed to be the best of the best, and people respectfully addressed them as "Fragrance Master." Once they completed their apprenticeships, their services were priceless.

Gu Yun had covered his eyes to play the role of a deaf-blind fragrance master. He had been in this getup since they departed, and asked everyone not to speak to him, so invested was he in his performance.

When they reached the pier, a stranger was waiting for them. Chang Geng lifted the curtain to see a rotund, middle-aged man with an amiable smile. "Zhang-xiansheng is later than expected. Did you encounter any delay on the road?"

Chang Geng didn't know whose identity Gu Yun had seamlessly assumed, but he guessed that the real fragrance expert had been kidnapped

en route by the Black Hawks. With a completely straight face, Chang Geng cupped his hands in greeting and said, “Our apologies, our master can neither see nor hear.”

The middle-aged man was taken aback. Gu Yun reached out and patted Chang Geng’s arm to signal that Chang Geng should lead him. He took Gu Yun’s arm and wondered to himself, *Even if he’s just pretending, his eyes really are covered—why isn’t he having any trouble getting around?*

He didn’t grope around in the slightest before finding Chang Geng; his aim was precise, almost like he was used to being blind.

Yet this was but a fleeting suspicion. When Gu Yun stepped down from the carriage, he bent down and nearly leaned fully into Chang Geng’s arms. Suddenly seeing him like this without his armor, Gu Yun looked unexpectedly frail. Chang Geng thought he could lift him off the ground with just a sweep of his arms.

His mouth went dry, and the composure he had demonstrated when interrogating Liao Ran with one question after another evaporated entirely. He could barely maintain his placid expression, his heart racing like a horse as he guided Gu Yun over to that middle-aged man, mechanical as a walking corpse.

A look of suspicion passed quickly over the man's face. He bowed and said, "My apologies, I was not aware that you were in fact a fragrance master. Our humble business has purchased only the type of condensed fragrance that comes at a few coins a jar, this…"

Before he could finish, a few men dressed as sailors turned their heads toward them in quick succession. Light flashed through each of their eyes, and their temples bulged—it was clear at a glance that these people were no sailors. Chang Geng ducked his head and pretended he hadn't seen, but stepped forward and discreetly shielded Gu Yun behind him. He wrote in Gu Yun's palm, "Master, they're asking about our origins."

# Chapter 31:
# The Land of the Dead

WITH NO CHANGE in expression, Gu Yun unhurriedly retrieved an envelope from his lapels and handed it to Chang Geng. There was no letter in the envelope. It was just an empty container with a cold scent floating about it—eaglewood and rosewood mixed with some other unidentifiable scent.

The previous evening, the Black Hawks had found three envelopes on the kidnapped fragrance expert, and this one was among them. Each of the three envelopes contained a different scent. The fragrance expert was remarkably stubborn, and refused to tell them the meaning behind the envelopes under any kind of interrogation or torture. Granted, with time being so short, Gu Yun probably wouldn't have taken him at his word even if he'd confessed.

Of these three envelopes, this was the only one of which Gu Yun had some understanding.

Supposedly, there was once a despotic emperor who subscribed to crooked doctrines and commanded his servants to create this fragrance to help him attain immortality. It was called Imperial Sovereign's Fragrance. Cold but lacking in clarity, it was rich and luxurious. The late emperor had kept some stashed away in secret and lit it on impulse one year, finding the scent quite unlike the incense commonly used in the palace. His Majesty had told Gu Yun that, although the scent was pleasant, people also called it Dying

Nation's Fragrance. Lighting it once in private was of little consequence, but if the Imperial Censors found out, they'd lose their minds. It must be kept a secret between the two of them.

All these years later, Gu Yun still had a strong impression of this Dying Nation's Fragrance.

Gu Yun had noticed Chang Geng tense up when the man spoke. Even before Chang Geng wrote anything in his hand, he was already considering

whether or not deploying this envelope was the right move. Gu Yun weighed his options and said to himself, *One out of three—those are decent odds. If all else fails, we'll just go with the flow.*

Fortunately, he was the only one aware of these "decent odds." Everyone else, seeing how perfectly assured he was, simply followed his lead.

A change came over the man's face. He accepted the envelope and carefully sniffed it a few times, his face unreadable.

*Are we going to have to fight?* Chang Geng wondered to himself.

Gu Yun casually patted his tightly clenched hand, a center of calm despite the fraught atmosphere.

When the middle-aged man looked up at Gu Yun again, his expression was much more relaxed. "My name is Zhai Song. I am the overseer of these ships. May I ask where you have come from and where you wish to go?"

This was a code. Chang Geng wrote every single word of it into Gu Yun's palm. Gu Yun opened his mouth for the first time, and said, "From the earth, to the land of the dead."

The man who called himself Zhai Song appeared startled by his answer. After a moment of hesitation, his voiced seemed to weaken a bit. "Then…then I will be troubling the fragrance master. This way, please."

Gu Yun stood unmoving, his performance of deafness unimpeachable. Only when Chang Geng lightly tugged on his arm did the blank-faced Gu Yun follow his lead, perfectly embodying a strange and temperamental "fragrance master" whose senses were dead to the world.

Under the cover of Gu Yun's wide sleeve, Chang Geng wrote in his palm, "Yifu, how did you know their code?"

The Black Hawks ordered to keep a watch on the merchant ships the night before had overheard the same exchange between two sailors and included it in their detailed report. Gu Yun had no idea what it meant and was only muddling his way through, but this didn't stop him from bragging to Chang Geng, "There's nothing I don't know."

The whole party boarded the Dongying merchant ship without a hitch. Several Dongying people emerged, examining this legendary fragrance master with curiosity. Under the influence of Great Liang, Shinto-Buddhist culture had flourished in Dongying, and quite a few people also came forward to offer their greetings when they saw the monk behind Gu Yun.

Chang Geng discreetly examined these Dongying people—their numbers were greater than he had imagined. On account of their official status as escorts for the ship, all of them were armed with long swords, and several of them had iron cuffs and strange-looking darts strapped to their wrists and thighs. As they crowded closer, Chang Geng detected a faint scent of blood coming off their bodies.

Suddenly there was a loud cry, and a masked Dongying person appeared out of thin air and landed behind Gu Yun, swinging a curved blade at his back without warning. Chang Geng's reaction was instantaneous. Without even removing his sword from its scabbard, he raised his blade and blocked the assailant's blow. The man let out a shrill, unintelligible shriek before his small, slender body contorted at a strange angle, as boneless as a snake. In his hands, the curved blade transformed into a wicked serpent's tongue and lashed out seven strikes in a row at Chang Geng. At the same time, the man's left shoulder burst open and a Dongying shuriken shot straight toward Gu Yun.

Perhaps Gu Yun was simply taking his performance to the fullest—he didn't move an inch as the blade hurtled toward him, as if he'd heard nothing at all. In desperation, Chang Geng drew his sword and hurled the sheath, knocking the shuriken away the instant before it brushed Gu Yun's chest.

This wasn't Chang Geng's first fight, nor was it the first time he'd had such a close call. But it was the first time someone had nearly wounded his young godfather right before his eyes. A faint sheen of red flickered across his eyes as the wu'ergu in his body began to stir. His wrist snapped down, and he deployed a move he usually used against the sword-training puppet. The curved sword in the Dongying attacker's hand trembled violently and nearly bent under the force of Chang Geng's blow. Before his opponent could retract his blade, Chang Geng landed a solid kick to his waist.

It was said that in order for certain Dongying people to climb walls and run along rooftops, to hide in wait and commit assassinations, they had to be smaller and more slender than the average person. This snakelike man must have been an exemplar among them—but though his movements were nimble and unpredictable, his slight frame couldn't take a beating. Chang Geng's kick nearly ejected his intestines from his throat. Unable to maintain his grip on the curved sword, he made a stumbling retreat.

Chang Geng did not intend to let him go. He flicked the curved sword off the ground with the toe of his boot, and it buried itself in the deck, barring the man's path. Chang Geng's own sword swiveled in his hand, poised to slice that Dongying man in half.

The whole scene happened in an instant, before either friend or enemy had the chance to react. Seeing Chang Geng about to strike the killing blow, three different cries of "Stop!" sounded at once. Several Eastern swords were thrust out from all directions, blocking Chang Geng's relentless attack in a flurry of movement.

The stupefied Liao Ran wiped sweat off his brow—last night, Chang Geng's threat to skewer him had indeed been in earnest.

"Out of my way!" Chang Geng shouted.

Zhai Song hurried over, babbling out a lengthy string of words. "A misunderstanding, it's all a misunderstanding! Mister Kamikawa here is visiting Great Liang for the first time; he doesn't quite understand the etiquette. Seeing that you carried a sword, he wanted to play a little joke. Please forgive him—don't stoop to his level."

Chang Geng stared at that snakelike man curled up behind a row of defenders with a slightly reddened gaze. He squeezed two words out between gritted teeth. "A joke?"

Zhai Song offered an apologetic smile and turned to Gu Yun, who was still standing there as if nothing were the matter. "Zhang-xiansheng…"

Seeing the man's blank expression, he once again recalled that these top-level fragrance experts were all blind and deaf. He stepped forward, reaching out to pat Gu Yun on the arm. But before his hand could make contact, something whipped through the air behind him. Luckily Zhai

Song’s reflexes were quick, or he would have lost everything below his wrist.

“Don’t touch him!”

Zhai Song was stupefied. In this party, one couldn’t hear, one couldn’t speak, and two of them were a pair of half-grown kids who looked like a drum and drumstick standing next to each other. The only person who could speak on behalf of the group was currently out of his mind and hadn’t even put away the lethal weapon in his hands. The situation fell into a temporary stalemate.

Gu Yun chose that moment to finally open his venerable mouth. “Why are we still wasting our time here? At this rate we’ll miss our departure time.”

He appeared not to have the faintest idea that such a heart-pounding struggle had broken out right beside him.

Zhai Song hurried to smooth things over. “Of course, of course, we’re all on the same side here…”

He still speaking when Gu Yun raised his hand, ignoring everyone else in the vicinity. Chang Geng paused, flipped his scabbard up off the deck with the tip of his sword, and re-sheathed the blade. He stepped forward and took Gu Yun’s arm, escorting him inside the cabin. Liao Ran took up the rear and offered his greetings to the group of shocked Dongying people, his hands cupped politely and an amiable expression on his face. He pulled out a shabby set of wooden Buddhist prayer beads. The beads had originally been painted dark red in an imitation of red sandalwood, but over the years, the monk had rubbed off most of the paint, leaving a mottled set of faded “sandalwood” beads.

The pretty-faced monk in clothing as mottled as his beads maintained a pleasant smile as he silently recited scriptures. He prayed for all the people before him, then followed Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi. This time, all the Dongying people they passed eyed their retreating backs as if appraising a great enemy. No one dared come up to greet them.

Chang Geng led Gu Yun to the cabin specially prepared for the fragrance expert, his nerves wound to the point of snapping. He glanced

cautiously outside the door before closing it and turning to face Gu Yun. “Yi…”

Gu Yun raised a finger to his lips.

In his current state, unless someone pressed right up to Gu Yun’s ear and shouted, he couldn’t hear anything at all. He could tell Chang Geng was about to talk to him from the rush of air as he whipped around after closing the door, and thus knew to shush him ahead of time.

Shortly after Gu Yun’s tenth birthday, one of the old marquis’s subordinates found a civilian medical expert who prescribed the special medicine he still used. Before then, he had simply lived with the impairments to his vision and hearing. The old marquis had spent half his life iron-blooded—he was strict with himself and even stricter with his son. He didn’t even know how the words “doting affection” were spelled. Regardless of whether Gu Yun could see or not, and no matter how Gu Yun felt about it himself, at the end of the day, he needed to learn what he needed to learn. And an iron puppet wouldn’t take any mercy on him just because of his disabilities.

Gu Yun’s childhood training companions were nothing like the sword-training puppet he’d brought out to play with Chang Geng. The sword-training puppet looked frightening, but it had been specially adjusted. It always stopped where appropriate when sparring with a person, and its weapons never hurt anyone. When real iron puppets began to fight, they were merciless iron monsters. What did they care if they hurt people?

The young Gu Yun had used his weak vision, hearing, and the feeling of faint shifts in the surrounding air against his skin to hold his own against them. But no matter how hard he tried, he could never keep up with the old marquis’s expectations. Every time he got used to one level of speed and power, the bar would immediately be raised.

In the old marquis’s own words, “Either get on your feet or go find a rafter to hang yourself. The Gu family would rather end its bloodline than keep trash among its ranks.”

These words were like a cold steel nail embedded in Gu Yun’s bones since early childhood. He could never pry it out no matter how long he lived. Even when the former marquis passed and Gu Yun moved into the palace, he dared not relax for even a single day. These senses of his, honed

to the extreme after years of practice, could at the very least help him keep up appearances on certain occasions. This was also the reason he refused to wear thicker clothes except in temperatures no mortal flesh could withstand —because thick and heavy fox-fur coats and padded cotton clothes dulled his senses.

Gu Yun groped around a bit in midair for Chang Geng's palm, then wrote, "The one who attacked you just now was a Dongying ninja. They're skilled at sneaking about and causing trouble. Watch out, the walls have ears."

Chang Geng lowered his head and couldn't resist grabbing Gu Yun's lightly calloused hand. He exhaled all the violent energy roiling about in his chest in a long sigh and shook his head in self-ridicule. Gu Yun was always calm, and he was always the one scared half to death.

Gu Yun was puzzled to hear Chang Geng sighing out of nowhere. He tilted his head quizzically, "looking" at him with one raised eyebrow. Taking advantage of Gu Yun's blindfolded eyes, Chang Geng blatantly stared at him until Gu Yun felt along his arm and patted the top of his head. Chang Geng closed his eyes and barely managed to resist the urge to nuzzle into his touch. Instead, he plucked Gu Yun's hand off and wrote, "This is the first time I've encountered such a situation at Yifu's side. I wasn't sure how to handle it, so I was frightened."

The most frightening moment was when the Dongying man had thrown his shuriken straight at Gu Yun's chest.

Gu Yun seemed to recall something and barked out a laugh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I *have* been too lenient with you," Gu Yun scrawled across his palm in looping cursive script. "If I had the guts to say I was 'frightened' to my dad's face, I'd have gotten a beating."

Chang Geng thought to himself, *Then why do you never beat me?*

Not only had Gu Yun never beaten him, he rarely even raised his voice or spoke to him in anger. And even when he did, he never stayed mad for more than a handful of stern words. He practically pampered Chang Geng like a daughter. The first few times Chang Geng faced off against the sword-training puppet, he had been scared and couldn't get the hang of it,

but Gu Yun never showed any disappointment or impatience. Looking back now, Chang Geng felt that his wasn't the gaze of a strict elder teaching a junior, but rather of someone indulgently watching a child's clumsy games.

"The Dongying people are very difficult to deal with in a fight. They have a lot of little tricks." Gu Yun wrote. "But they don't have many true experts. That shuriken looked fearsome, but its trajectory was curved. It was just a test to see if I was really blind. There's nothing to fear from the Dongying people on this ship—what I'm worried about is their destination."

The merchant ship was set to traverse the waterway between the canal and the seaports and sail east across the ocean to deliver its cargo to Dongying territory, passing through several inspection points on the way. All fragrance-carrying ships were required to have a fragrance expert on board to turn over verified samples at each inspection point. No matter the true purpose of this fleet, they must rely on this fragrance expert to keep their cover on the way.

Ten or so days into their voyage, Ge Pangxiao snuck into Gu Yun's room. "My lo—Zhang-xiansheng. Chang Geng-dage."

When he got no response, he looked at the blindfold on Marquis Gu's face and muttered, "I forgot he's deaf."

Ge Pangxiao began pulling things out of his lapels. First, there were two compasses, then a small box that emitted an endless stream of white steam. This chubby kid was quite miraculous. It was like his belly could extend and retract—he could fit any number of things in his lapels when he sucked in, yet even after he removed the objects, he didn't seem to get any slimmer.

"What's this? Is something burning in there?" Chang Geng asked, pointing to the box.

"Heh heh, it's violet gold."

Chang Geng was shocked. "Isn't that hot?"

Ge Pangxiao peeled open his clothes to show a dark board covering the front of his chest. It was a plate used as protective insulation for the

attachment of miniature cannons in heavy armor. He had cut it into a pattern like a diamond-shaped dudou undershirt, and now shamelessly patted his belly. “An iron dudou!”

Gu Yun removed his blindfold, put on his glass monocle, and scooted closer to examine Ge Pangxiao’s masterpiece. He was rather impressed. Although this naughty kid usually acted like all he knew was play, the determination he’d shown in leaving Yanhui Town and following Chang Geng to the capital at such a young age proved that even if he sometimes missed the big picture, he definitely had some thoughts of his own.

Mimicking Liao Ran’s sign language, Ge Pangxiao signed, “Who said only women can wear dudou?”

Gu Yun gave him a thumbs-up—*that’s right!*

On the table, the two compasses spun in circles, completely incomprehensible. Ge Pangxiao motioned for the other two to look, lightly knocked against the table with his knuckles, then raised three fingers—the compasses had been spinning for at least three days.

Gu Yun was a seasoned traveler, so he understood at a glance. Fengshui masters always brought two compasses with them when they went out—if one of them started acting up, they could look at the other to tell if the compass was broken or if there was something strange about the locale. There were many places on the sea or in the desert where compasses would spin aimlessly, and merchant ships and fishing vessels usually avoided them. This group of Dongying people, however, not only didn’t avoid such regions, they navigated their ship straight into one. Their route had clearly deviated from the declared destination.

“From the earth, to the land of the dead”—what exactly did “the land of the dead” refer to?

“Fortunately,” said Ge Pangxiao, “I also brought this.”

He opened the box, which was still trailing white steam. Inside was an exquisite little gadget with a tiny gear rotating in circles in the very center. This gear was connected to an axle, and there were several shiny golden rings along the edges of the interior. The character “ling” was inscribed in the corner in seal script—this was a creation of the Lingshu Institute.

“The Lingshu Institute gave us the template for this. While it’s running, this axle right here,” Ge Pangxiao pointed at the component in question, “always points in the same direction—it’s more accurate than a compass, but it runs on violet gold, so the finished product never made it to market. I hear the higher-ups rejected it. The great master and I made one of our own in secret, and we took some violet gold dregs from Dage’s sword-training puppet before we left.”

Gu Yun carefully lifted the little thing. It was so delicate, he was afraid he’d break it if he handled it roughly. “If Shen Yi saw this, he would gladly hand over his body and soul to its creator.”

Ge Pangxiao once again reached into his lapels and produced a sheepskin map from who knows where, spreading the wrinkled material out on the table. His chubby finger traced over it for a while before landing on a certain spot. “Based on our current heading, the great master and I have deduced that we’ve almost arrived.”

# Chapter 32:
# Linyuan

GE PANGXIAO'S FINGER rested on a tiny archipelago in the East Sea. The map wasn't very neatly drawn, and the islands looked like a string of inky blots left by the careless flick of a brush.

Gu Yun had a map of the entirety of Great Liang stored safely inside his head, but he had no recollection of such a place. The merchant ship lacked a proper gas lamp, and the oil lamp illuminating the room was too dim. Even with the monocle, it was difficult for him to see anything. He frowned and tried to adjust the oil lamp brighter.

"Great Master Liao Ran gave me this map," said Ge Pangxiao. "I've checked, the Ministry of War's maps don't have this place marked. They're probably some small uninhabitable islands. This area of the sea is surrounded by turbulent currents and invisible reefs, and the people along the coast have no shortage of ghost stories about these waters. Even the locals don't know there are islands there."

This place was a significant distance from the mainland. It was impossible to swim there; you would have to get there either by ship or by flight.

But Great Liang's military kites and dragons were both reliant on compasses. If there were disturbances in the celestial poles at these coordinates, no vessel would be able to find this place. What's more, anything further east of here was effectively the territory of Dongying. Great Liang's kites and dragons hovering around the area for no reason would be seen as hostile provocation.

For travel by flight, that left only the hawks. But the maintenance of hawk armor was very demanding and required skilled technicians. Since the upkeep of their equipment was difficult and costly, and since the eastern coast had been at peace for many years, the Hawk Division had no troops stationed here.

“If it’s not even on the Ministry of War’s charts, where did Great Master Liao Ran get this map?” Chang Geng couldn’t help but ask.

“He said there was a despotic ruler of a previous reign who loved the pearls of the East Sea,” Ge Pangxiao earnestly explained. “The fishermen, at the end of their rope from the yearly demands for tribute, organized a pearl-collecting suicide squad, which accidentally stumbled across this place. Those very fishermen later drew this map.”

Chang Geng stared. What a shoddy story Liao Ran had made up to placate a foolish kid!

Ge Pangxiao turned to Gu Yun and signed, “My lord, what do we do?”

Before Gu Yun could reply, the entire ship shuddered. Gu Yun grabbed for the oil lamp before it could tip over. With a glance, he signaled Ge Pangxiao to put away everything on the table. Demonstrating his quick wit, Ge Pangxiao puffed out his chest and sucked in his belly, rapidly stuffing all the miscellaneous items back into his lapels.

Chang Geng picked up his sword from the table. “I’ll go take a look.”

“Wait, I’m going too!” called Ge Pangxiao.

The two of them darted out of the room one after the other. Gu Yun removed the glass monocle and set it aside, rubbing his aching eyes. This small string of islands was very subtly placed. It was past the Dongying archipelago, and it also wasn’t connected to Great Liang. It lay right across a short stretch of water from Jinan prefecture. With a good strategy, making an advance on the capital from such a place wasn’t out of the question.

But no matter how weak Great Liang’s navy might be, it wasn’t anything that could be defeated by some small foreign nation to the East. No veins of violet gold had been discovered in the East Sea to date, and Great Liang strictly forbid any export of the fuel, like a stingy iron rooster that wouldn’t allow one to pluck a single feather. If Dongying wanted to use violet gold at scale, they’d either have to buy it at high prices from the Westerners or find a way to procure it from Great Liang’s black markets. If this violet gold had been purchased from the Westerners, there was no reason for it to have been transported overland through Great Liang.

As for the black markets…unless their people had connections among officials, it would be difficult for them get a foothold. Great Liang's black markets for violet gold, the bane of three generations of emperors, were like the corpse of a great centipede that refused to go stiff even after death. As soon as restrictions loosened a bit, they'd flare up again from the ashes. One scarcely needed more than a pinky toe's worth of brains to understand that this couldn't be solely a market between civilian desperados. The shadows of all kinds of factions were slinking behind the scenes.

Never mind anyone else, Gu Yun's own hands certainly weren't clean. With only that pittance of violet gold the court supplied him every year, he'd be hard-pressed to support a house sparrow, a black dog, and an evening bat, much less the Black Hawk, Black Carapace, and Black Steed Divisions.

The master of such a large-scale violet gold smuggling operation as this must be no ordinary person.

Without warning, someone pushed open the cabin's wooden door. Liao Ran swept inside like an airy immortal, gave Gu Yun a casual greeting, and shut the door behind him.

Gu Yun had no choice but to perch his glass monocle back on his nose to receive his guest. He could never understand why Liao Ran was so confident he wouldn't earn himself a beating. Was it because he thought he had a handsome face?

In the chill of Gu Yun's cold stare, Liao Ran found a chair and sat down as if he'd received a warm welcome. He scooted up to Gu Yun and signed, "We'll arrive at the land of the dead by nightfall. At that time, this monk will be at your command."

"That's not necessary—what can you even do? I'm in no need of a lamp."

Liao Ran had no retort to that.

Gu Yun sat up a bit straighter, the sharpness in his eyes uninhibited by his lack of vision. "I never would have expected Linyuan to extend its hands into the National Temple. Great Master, let's drop the sticks and stop

beating around the bush. What exactly are you trying to accomplish by getting yourselves involved in this affair?”

The smile Liao Ran used when begging for alms slowly slid off his face, replaced with an eminent monk’s sorrowful compassion.
“The Linyuan Pavilion has no ill intent.”

Gu Yun’s own smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Why else do you think you’re still alive?”

Legend had it that long ago, during the reign of a foolish and incapable ruler, the court had extorted brutal taxes and bled the people dry. As the dynasty teetered on the verge of decline, the nation’s heroes rose to the call. The founding emperor of the current dynasty was able to rise above the muck in large part thanks to the intervention of the mysterious Linyuan Pavilion.

This Linyuan Pavilion was composed of individuals from all walks of life. From nobles and high officials to ordinary working people, it accepted all sorts and attracted countless eccentric talents. After the founding of Great Liang, the first emperor wished to confer official titles upon the Linyuan Pavilion in gratitude for their great contribution, but the Pavilion Master stubbornly refused. This great entity disappeared into the jianghu, where they remained silent—until now.

“The Linyuan Pavilion retreats into obscurity in prosperous times and resurfaces in times of chaos. Everyone calls the Black Iron Battalion crows, but I think the real crow is your distinguished self.”

Liao Ran lowered his eyes like a handsome and benevolent Buddha. “My lord, you knew of my origins, yet you never prevented me from getting close to His Highness.”

Gu Yun looked at him in silence.

“This monk will make a daring guess that your thoughts and concerns happen to align with ours.”

The ship steadied, and the flame of the oil lamp on the table flickered. The hostility in Gu Yun’s eyes fell away. He sat by the table with his long hair loose around him and a faint furrow between his brows, all the seriousness and respectability he normally trod underfoot surfacing on his face at once. The two stared at each other, but not a single word was

spoken. Their conversation was held in a rapid exchange of gestures, yet that didn't hinder them for a moment.

Liao Ran began. "The violet gold burns too fiercely; we won't be able to douse this flame. No one can. Have you considered your avenue of retreat?" Before Gu Yun could respond, he continued, "Everyone says the Marquis of Order is a military man who knows nothing but war, a mere blade in the emperor's hands. That's not what I see. Otherwise, why have you still not married? It couldn't actually be because of my shixiong's curse?"

Gu Yun seemed to smile. Deciding he had heard enough from Liao Ran, he put away his glass monocle and covered his eyes once again with that dark strip of cloth. When it was in place, he signed, "The Gu family has no avenue of retreat. If that day does come, I will simply use my humble self as fuel and become a funeral offering to my grandfather's nation. Oh and—the next time you see that miracle doctor who treated my eyes, please wish him well for me."

The moment the first bowl of violet gold was dug out of the earth, the world lost any chance at peace.

One day, even the most diligent farmer would lose to the tireless iron puppets roaming up and down the fields. Even the most peerless fighter would fall in the face of a heavy armor's cannon powerful enough to wipe out an army of thousands. Every single child of these times would face unprecedented revolution before they might once again find a place of their own, no matter if they were noble and blessed with riches or the lowliest of the low.

Those who lost in the elevated arena ignited by violet gold would never recover from their defeat—whether vast nations or the insignificant teeming masses, it was all the same.

When the world woke up to this inevitability, an unavoidable era of turmoil would arrive. It was only a matter of time. This was the pulse of the era. Whether one was an unmatched hero, a king, a noble, a general, or a minister, no one had the power to stop it.

After Gu Yun said his piece, he quietly stood up and paid Liao Ran no further attention. He strolled out of the cabin, hands behind his back.

What exactly was going on outside that led Liao Ran to run over and proclaim his loyalties as if they were on the brink of war?

The instant he stepped out onto the deck, he detected a strange scent carried on the ocean breeze—it was the smell of something burning. Gu Yun stood at the door for several moments, carefully analyzing the scent, before he realized that it was the strange and mild scent that came of burning adulterated violet gold.

The “merchant ship” was presently winding its way through the shallows surrounding the small islands of the archipelago. Two solemn rows of dragon ships flanked them on both sides, the snow-bright battleships arranged in long lines, each ship fully locked and loaded. The merchant ships and their illicit cargo of violet gold proceeded in single file like unassuming rations carts weaving between a magnificent army of thousands.

Gu Yun couldn’t see, but he could guess the surrounding situation from the heavy tension in the air. Never mind the paltry handful of Black Hawks he brought with him, even the Jiangnan Navy would fall to such a force.

A familiar person approached and silently reached out to touch him. No one but Chang Geng did this. Other people either took his arm or not; they didn’t perform this complex ritual like Chang Geng did. Gu Yun felt that Chang Geng was always mysteriously on edge around him—he invariably felt the need to start by subtly announcing his presence. Unless Gu Yun reached out in return to let him take his arm, Chang Geng would follow a step behind him and never close the distance.

Inexplicable. Gu Yun took the arm Chang Geng offered and wondered to himself, *Why is he so nervous with me? Is there a single father in this world who’s kinder to their son than I am?*

“There are maybe a hundred big warships here,” Chang Geng rapidly wrote in his palm, “I’m not sure if they’re sea dragons…”

“They are,” Gu Yun replied, “I smelled them. There’s the scent of violet gold.”

Chang Geng didn’t know how to respond to this. Didn’t Liao Ran say humans couldn’t smell the scent of violet gold? That only canine inspectors

could do it?

Gu Yun sighed and muttered to himself, not without resentment, *It's all because of that disastrous, stingy brother of yours. He couldn't relax unless he sent me all the way to the northwest. Well, now the old tortoise in the lotus pond of his rear garden has cultivated into a spirit and thinks it's time to raise some waves! Serves him right!*

That evening, Liao Ran changed into his "nighttime camouflage" and came to visit Gu Yun again. Gu Yun was wearing his glass monocle. He could only hear sounds within a half-meter radius around him, and he could barely tell who else was in the room through his one assisted eye. The troops under his control included a mute monk, a fake little girl, a chubby little boy, and an expert tantrum-thrower of a son—while their opponents included armed and ready sea dragon warships and countless Eastern warriors and private soldiers.

But no one was nervous because Gu Yun was there. This man alone was as good as an army of thousands of soldiers and horses.

"Drop the act," Gu Yun said to Liao Ran. "Your people must have infiltrated this 'land of the dead,' or why would you have gone to such lengths to plan this whole charade? 'Fess up, we're grasshoppers on the same rope now."

Liao Ran soundlessly mouthed the name of the Buddha, then pulled out his faded "sandalwood" prayer beads. When Gu Yun reached out to take them, he suddenly wrinkled his nose, his unusually sharp sense of smell catching hold of a rancid scent. Gu Yun reared back. He made it a rule to never speak politely to monks, so he said bluntly, "My heavens, Great Master, how long has it been since you've bathed? Those things have practically acquired a patina."

The three teenagers took three swift steps back.

Chang Geng could barely recall what Great Master Liao Ran looked like during their first encounter in the palace. Back then, Liao Ran had shown his sincerity when attending an audience with the emperor, washing himself as clean as a white lotus emerging from the water.

Gu Yun's expression was cold, and his mood was horrible. He was blind and deaf, yet this monk was a mute; he had an extremely keen sense of smell, yet the monk hated to bathe—indeed, there was no bald donkey in this world who didn't actively antagonize him.

Of the one hundred and eight Buddhist prayer beads, except for the small spacer beads, every third bead could be twisted open from the middle. Inside was an iron seal, thirty-six in total, each representing a member of the Linyuan Pavilion.

Gu Yun was silent for a time. "Has the Linyuan Pavilion turned out in full force?"

Liao Ran smiled but said nothing.

Chang Geng frowned. "What is the Linyuan Pavilion?"

Caught off guard by Chang Geng's question, Gu Yun failed to hear what he said and was only able to guess when he saw Liao Ran begin to sign at Chang Geng. He interrupted them at once. "They're a bunch of ominous naysayers who excel at making trouble—enough with the explanations, how do we contact these people?"

"I'm not sure about the others," signed Liao Ran, "but one of them is working as a musician for the leader of the fleet. We just need to get in touch with her."

Gu Yun thought to himself, *Our army on the northwestern front doesn't even have a singing cricket, yet this private army has its own musician? Is there no justice in this world?*

"But the Dongying people are suspicious of us," said Chang Geng. "I've sensed that noodle man in the vicinity several times—we can't move about as we please."

Since Chang Geng had taken the lead, Ge Pangxiao also spoke up. "My lord, when will our people arrive?"

Gu Yun sat across from them, steady and composed, with the inscrutable mien of the martial god of Great Liang—and heard not a single thing.

Liao Ran hurriedly came to his rescue and signed, "We must be patient and wait. Once the Jiangnan Navy makes a move, it will be all too

easy to alert our enemies…”

Gu Yun managed to deduce through his gestures that Ge Pangxiao had asked about reinforcements. *I can count the Black Hawks I brought on one hand,* he thought to himself, *and Yao Zhen is a freeloader who sleeps ten hours a day. Who knows if he’ll be of any use. Maybe he can help clean up the battlefield after everything’s done and dusted.*

He interrupted Liao Ran again and said without an ounce of shame, “It’s impossible to gather a navy on this scale within a couple of days. I suspect a member of the imperial court is planning a revolt. Cleaning up this worthless trash isn’t our goal; it’s more important to find the true ringleader.”

Liao Ran, who had kindheartedly covered for Gu Yun only to be interrupted twice, smiled good-naturedly as he sat across from him like an unwashed lotus flower.

Cao Niangzi coughed. He didn’t speak aloud—ever since he’d gotten a look at Gu Yun’s unbound hair in this getup, he’d been unable to say a word in Gu Yun’s presence—thus the deaf man conveniently got off easy this time. Cao Niangzi cautiously signed, “I could give it a try.”

Likely because Gu Yun knew this kid dawdled about in lovesick infatuation from dawn to dusk and never paid serious attention to martial training, he resolutely refused. “Absolutely not. Keep playing the maid.”

“I can disguise myself as a Dongying person,” Cao Niangzi said.

Gu Yun raised an eyebrow.

“I can.” Cao Niangzi hurriedly added, “I’ve even disguised myself as a man before.”

Gu Yun leaned in close and said earnestly, “Kid, you are aware you’ve always been a man, right?”

Cao Niangzi’s face went red with a *fwoom*, every piece of his soul swiveling about like pendulum weights on strings. He had no mental space whatsoever left to process what Gu Yun said. Suddenly, Gu Yun was yanked back by a hand on his shoulder—Chang Geng wasn’t afraid to touch him this time. He stood behind him with a severe look on his face, his gloomy expression practically identical to that pedantic scholar Shen Yi’s.

Gu Yun coughed. He allowed himself to be pulled, then got serious again. “It’s still a no. You don’t know how to speak the Dongying language.”

Cao Niangzi opened his mouth and spoke. Everyone present—aside from Gu Yun, who couldn’t hear it—was astonished. He’d uttered a complicated string of syllables. It contained a few incomprehensible Dongying words, and the rest was a stiff-tongued version of Great Liang’s official language. Traveling along Great Liang’s coast year after year, the Dongying people on the ship had some proficiency in Chinese, but their accent was strange, and their speech interspersed with words from their native tongue. Cao Niangzi had picked up a perfect imitation of this pidgin.

Cao Niangzi noticed everyone staring at him and immediately lost his composure, ducking his head to bury his face in his hands.

That night, a slender Dongying youth slipped undetected onto the small island.

There were plenty of Dongying people here, and it was dark out, so no one noticed him. He shuddered at the sight of the rows and rows of dragons in the fleet anchored just offshore. Tamping down his anxiety, he took off at a run.

Meanwhile, an uninvited guest appeared at Gu Yun’s door.

Chang Geng opened the door a crack and spotted Zhai Song standing outside with a smile. “The general heard our ship is honored with the presence of a fragrance master. I’ve been instructed to invite you to a banquet.”

# Chapter 33:
# Hints

"PLEASE WAIT A MOMENT," Chang Geng replied coolly.

With no change in expression, he slapped the door shut. He took a deep breath to center himself before turning to Gu Yun and signing, "Yifu, the rebel leader wants to see you, what do we do?"

Ge Pangxiao's heart was pounding in his chest. He unconsciously held his breath, his face quickly turning the color of an eggplant. Gu Yun's reaction was very peculiar. After a brief moment of surprise, he began to smile—it was the smile of someone who held the key to victory in his hand, of one who shared a crucial secret with someone else.

"Would you look at that. Someone has brought me a pillow just as I started getting drowsy," said the Marquis of Order who reveled in chaos. "It's been years since I've seen a rebel leader in the flesh."

Gullible and unguarded as he was, Ge Pangxiao relaxed when he saw Gu Yun's flippant attitude, as if they weren't going to see a rebel leader, but some rare treasure. Chang Geng, however, refused to swallow his nonsense. His mouth was drawn tight, the piled-up worries from the past few days appearing on his face all at once. He silently signed, "Where are the Jiangnan Navy and Black Iron Battalion?"

Even someone as blind as Gu Yun could see the pallor of Chang Geng's face.

Chang Geng didn't know what exactly the Linyuan Pavilion was, but everyone knew about Marshal Gu's grudge against the National Temple. If Gu Yun had anyone else he could use, why would he bring Liao Ran, who grated endlessly on his nerves?

Yanhui had been different—he had been carrying the emperor's secret decree and had every right to summon soldiers to his command. This time, Gu Yun had clearly abandoned his post and run off to Jiangnan. It was already impressive that he'd brought along a few Black Hawk guards…how could he possibly call for reinforcements?

And earlier, why had Gu Yun paused each time before he spoke, only to rudely interrupt Liao Ran's every sentence? It was like he was targeting the monk. Even if Gu Yun behaved rather despicably in private, he wouldn't create this sort of friction for no good reason while engaged in serious business.

A fearsome notion flashed through Chang Geng's head. Could it be that Gu Yun wasn't pretending? Could he really not hear them speak and only deduced what they said from Liao Ran's signed response?

The idea was preposterous. But once the thought occurred to him, numerous oddities from the past few days surfaced in his mind.

First, Gu Yun was not a quiet person. But since they'd boarded the ship, whether the two of them were alone together or with the group, Gu Yun never spoke to him aloud—all their necessary communication had been through sign language. Had the Dongying people really kept such careful watch the whole time?

Second, why con his way onto the ship as a fragrance expert? And there were plenty of lower-level fragrance experts around, so why did Gu Yun insist on disguising himself as a fragrance master? Not only did this provide no benefits, it presented quite a number of difficulties. It was too easy for him to expose himself, and Chang Geng held no illusions that Gu Yun was simply keen to improve his acting skills.

Third—a minute detail—why did Liao Ran not once knock before entering Gu Yun's room? Was that monk truly so brave and careless of etiquette…or did he know there was no point in knocking?

Chang Geng ought to have noticed these things long ago. But Marshal Gu, long accustomed to wielding military power, carried an inexplicable aura about him. One somehow felt he had everything under control, and everyone need only obey his orders. Clouded by this blind belief, one unconsciously overlooked anything unnatural.

Noticing the strangeness of Chang Geng's expression, Ge Pangxiao looked back and forth in confusion. Outside, Zhai Song knocked lightly again and raised his voice to call through the door. "The general is waiting, if Zhang-xiansheng could make haste."

Gu Yun patted Chang Geng on the shoulder, leaned in close to his ear, and whispered, “The Black Iron Battalion is here, don’t be afraid.”

He took out the strip of black cloth he used as a blindfold and handed it to Chang Geng, signaling for him to help tie it in place. Chang Geng accepted the bit of fabric, expression unreadable, then lifted it to cover Gu Yun’s eyes.

While Gu Yun couldn’t see him, Chang Geng shook his head at Ge Pangxiao. The younger boy was still wondering what he meant when Chang Geng said mildly in his direction, “Yifu, if you keep going on like this, I’m disowning you.”

Ge Pangxiao’s eyes went wide. “Hah?”

With a smile tugging up the corner of his lips, Gu Yun waved in Ge Pangxiao’s direction. “Cut the chatter, you two. Come along and don’t leave my side. You might as well gain some experience since you’re here.”

Ge Pangxiao was flummoxed by this completely nonsensical conversation. But Chang Geng felt his heart sink—Gu Yun really couldn’t hear. He had merely used some method to deduce that he and Ge Pangxiao were speaking. Then were his eyes also…but they were clearly fine just a few days ago!

Before he could consider the matter any further, Gu Yun had already taken the lead and stepped out the door. Chang Geng’s heart missed a beat; he was near panic as he chased after Gu Yun to take his arm. He had no time for embarrassment or awkwardness—he nervously grabbed Gu Yun’s arm in one hand and wound his other around the man’s body, heart palpitating in fear as he escorted him in a half-embrace.

Gu Yun thought this unforeseen summons had made Chang Geng uneasy, so he blithely reached over to pat Chang Geng’s arm. After all the half-lies Gu Yun had deployed against even his own people, Chang Geng could no longer tell if his young godfather was truly careless or only putting on a show of bravado. He could only follow along, his heart tripping circles in his chest.

“Zhang-xiansheng, this way please,” Zhai Song said with a smile. Taking note of Chang Geng and Ge Pangxiao beside Gu Yun, he asked “Hm? The great master and the young lady aren’t here?”

“The young lady is having a hard time adjusting to the conditions of the voyage, so the great master will stay behind to take care of her.” Chang Geng shot a look at Zhai Song. Though his full attention was locked on Gu Yun, he spared a little piece to offer Zhai Song a smile like hidden needles wrapped in cotton wool. “Why do you ask? Does the general want us all present for his inspection?”

“Young master, we would never,” said Zhai Song politely.

These were originally deserted islands, scattered in the East Sea like sheep droppings. The largest was still small enough that someone could probably walk its perimeter in a day. The smaller ones had only an acre or so of land—and each was surrounded by docked sea dragons. Swaying iron gangways exuding puffs of white steam connected the fleet in an extensive net. From a distance, it looked like a city suspended above the ocean.

As they walked, Chang Geng noted all the things he saw in Gu Yun’s palm. At the same time, the young man couldn’t help but wonder. These islands were in an obscure location, and it would indeed be difficult to discover violet gold was being smuggled here…but seeing the scale of this place, these people had practically constructed a copy of the immortal island of Penglai.[25] Was the Jiangnan Navy dead? Or had the Jiangnan Navy been infiltrated by these people from the beginning?

All sorts of wild guesses were floating through his brain when Zhai Song suddenly stopped in his tracks.

A troupe of women dressed as dancers swept across their path on graceful, featherlight steps. Their feet seemed hardly to touch the ground as they crossed the swaying gangway, looking like a crowd of celestial maidens amid the swirling white steam. A woman in white led the procession with a pipa in her arms. When she saw Zhai Song cross her path, she came to a stop and dipped a curtsy. She wasn’t especially pretty, her features so plain and unremarkable it was as if they were covered in a layer of gauze. Though she was pleasant enough to look at, there wasn’t a single eye-catching thing about her. As soon as she turned away it became difficult to remember what she looked like.

“I couldn’t possibly,” Zhai Song demurred. “Please go ahead, Miss Chen, don’t keep the general waiting.”

The woman nodded in acknowledgment and curtsied again with her pipa in hand. As she floated away, the scent of pacifying incense drifted in her wake. Chang Geng saw the corner of Gu Yun's mouth tilt up in a slight smile.

Still in disguise as a young Dongying man, Cao Niangzi had run all the way to an unremarkable little boat whose guard was asleep. He held an iron rod behind his back as he approached. Cao Niangzi was small and slender, more light-footed than the average person. The guard showed no sign of waking even when he got close. In the light of the moon over the ocean, Cao Niangzi took a good look at that slack-jawed, snoring man. Seeing the drool leaking down his neck, Cao Niangzi was put at ease. *How ugly!*

The boat rocked on a gentle wave, and the guard turned in his sleep, nearly falling off his wooden chair. He woke, smacking his lips, only to discover there was someone standing next to him. The guard sat up straight and saw that the person in front of him was an androgynous Dongying youth who greeted him crisply in the Dongying tongue.

The man relaxed at once. He rubbed his eyes to get a better look at the person in front of him, but before he could, Cao Niangzi swung the rod straight down on the back of his head.

The guard collapsed without so much as a whimper. His assailant patted his own chest and babbled, "That was so scary, so scary!"

Though he looked frightened to death, Cao Niangzi's nimble hands didn't hesitate to retrieve a ring of keys from the guard's waist before turning and darting into the cabin. It was just as that person had described—this was the brig, with twenty or thirty people who seemed to be mechanics locked inside. The moment Cao Niangzi peered in, the people within cried out like birds startled by the twang of a bow, "A wokou pirate!"[26]

"Shh—" Speaking in a hushed voice, Cao Niangzi crowned himself with a great big title. "I'm not a person of Dongying. I am an ally of the Marquis of Anding, Marshal Gu. We've come to put down the revolt! Let's get all of you freed first."

As the night deepened, a thin layer of fog roiled above the glimmering waves.

Liao Ran and an agile figure in black darted into a ship’s cabin, in which several dozen suits of steel armor were laid out in neat rows. Liao Ran retrieved a bottle from inside his bag, then turned and tossed it to his companion. After a quick look at each other, the two began spraying squid ink onto the steel armor together.

Zhai Song led Gu Yun and the others onto an unassuming-looking sea dragon. Before they reached the end of the gangway, they could already hear laughter and music coming from inside the ship’s cabin.

It happened the moment Zhai Song set foot on the deck. A familiar roar came from the corner, and with an explosion of white steam, an iron puppet charged from its hiding place in the darkness and swung its sword at Gu Yun. Even Zhai Song was caught off guard and yelped in fear, falling back on his rear end.

Chang Geng’s hand reflexively flew to his sword, but before he could draw it, someone shoved his hand down, slamming the blade back into its sheath.

In the next moment, the weight in his arms disappeared as Gu Yun, still deaf and blind, flipped bodily over the iron puppet’s sword. His movements were almost lazy as he lightly tapped his instep on the monster’s shoulder. The snow-bright gleam of the iron puppet’s sword cast a long streak of illumination across his face.

Chang Geng’s pupils contracted—wasn’t he deaf, weren’t his eyes covered?

The glare of the blade swept past in an instant, and in the next, Gu Yun had disappeared behind the iron puppet. Screams erupted in the night, then ceased just as quickly. Zhai Song gave a violent shiver.

The attacking iron puppet froze mid-swing, and the body of a Dongying man was tossed onto the deck. Gu Yun’s robes whipped back and forth in the ocean breeze as he stood on the deck and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe his hands. He lifted his head slightly and carelessly extended a hand as if there were no one else present.

Chang Geng's throat bobbed, his heart pounding like a drum as he took Gu Yun's arm.

Gu Yun spoke aloud. "If this is the general's so-called 'sincerity,' we needn't have bothered to come in the first place."

Zhai Song wiped the sweat from his cheek and opened to his mouth to say something, but Gu Yun cut him off.

"No need to explain," Gu Yun said airily, "I'm deaf, I can't hear you."

He turned to leave. But before he could, the cabin door, behind which the sounds of song and dance still echoed, slammed open, and two rows of soldiers streamed out, forming a path between them. Chang Geng looked back toward the cabin and saw a beardless middle-aged man with a pale face. Eyes fixed on Gu Yun's back, he called out, "Zhang-xiansheng, please wait!"

Gu Yun ignored him. Chang Geng wrote in his palm, "The ringleader has come out."

*Son, there's no way that's the ringleader,* Gu Yun thought.

The man stood and made a bow with his hands cupped before him. "Zhang-xiansheng's reputation precedes him. That wretched emperor has in his possession such a talent yet fails to put you to good use. It truly shows his days are numbered."

Ge Pangxiao was more and more confused the longer he listened. *Isn't Zhang-xiansheng some random fake name the marquis made up? What reputation? This flattery is way too insincere.*

Dropping the aloof act, Gu Yun tilted his head and asked Chang Geng, "What did he say?"

"He said your reputation precedes you and the emperor is courting death by not using you properly," Chang Geng summarized. In these few moments, he had put the pieces together.

Of course—Gu Yun had boarded the ship in the guise of a fragrance expert. The fragrance expert was like the sailors and the Dongying guards—though members of the same faction, they were just minor underlings. Why would the ringleader call for him by name? Either his real identity had

been exposed, or that monk's people had used some method to manufacture a false identity for Gu Yun.

Chang Geng recalled Gu Yun's brief surprise and ensuing smile when he heard the ringleader wanted to see him. His heart began to sour—so, his godfather had known since then?

After a year of separation, he no longer needed to look up at Gu Yun. He even felt that, without his armor, he could pull Gu Yun into his embrace with a single arm. But that sense of a distance he would never be able to cross rose once again in the young man's heart. Gu Yun didn't turn back but gave a composed nod.

"This humble one is not familiar with Zhang-xiansheng and saw that you cannot see or hear," the middle-aged man said with hands cupped in greeting. "Although this humble one did receive letters of recommendation, it is thanks to these Dongying barbarians' lack of manners that I have now witnessed your expert abilities. Aha, my eyes have been opened—Qingxu, pour some wine for Zhang-xiansheng and offer him my apologies."

Chang Geng gave Gu Yun a brief summary of the man's vacuous ramblings. Before he finished writing, he saw a figure inside the banquet room rise. It was the white-clothed woman they had seen on their way here. She expressionlessly poured a bowl of wine—not a cup, but a bowl.

The woman walked over steadily and spoke not a word as she held the bowl up to Gu Yun. The scent of pacifying incense they had noticed earlier wafted over on the ocean winds. Although she was an entertainer, there was no coquettish cast to her face or manner, but rather an aloof coldness. Gu Yun accepted the wine from the woman's hands and sniffed at it. A faint smile replaced his cool indifference, and he quietly gave his thanks. Chang Geng had no chance to stop him before he lifted the bowl and drained the contents.

The woman lowered her eyes politely and bowed before retreating off to the side. The middle-aged man laughed. "How direct of Zhang-xiansheng. I like straightforward people like you."

In a panic, Chang Geng scrawled in his palm, "Aren't you afraid it's poisoned?"

Gu Yun thought this was what that unworldly ringleader had asked, and confidently replied, “If you wanted to poison a blind and deaf fragrance master, you would have to take some pains to find an odorless poison.”

Chang Geng was speechless. Fortunately, Gu Yun’s attitude was overly arrogant in the first place, and although the words seemed a bit blunt, they weren’t glaringly out of place. Yet now Chang Geng was even more certain that Gu Yun really couldn’t hear and wasn’t pretending at all.

“Please, take a seat.” said the middle-aged man.

Chang Geng didn’t dare mess around this time and faithfully conveyed his words to Gu Yun as spoken.

Their group proceeded into the cabin, where the aloof woman began to play a piece on her pipa. “It is our good fortune that the foolish ruler has failed to live up to the virtues of his position and thus allowed us to gather the nation’s heroes,” the middle-aged man said. “It is truly the most fortunate occurrence of my life.”

Gu Yun laughed coldly. “I, however, don’t find it at all fortunate to find myself stuck in a room with a bunch of wokou pirates.”

His every word was barbed, but his taunts somehow reinforced his image as a transcendent talent. The middle-aged man was unfazed, clearly prepared to subject himself to all the eccentrics of the nation in the interests of executing his revolt. He said with a smile, “Those who accomplish great things don’t get hung up on trifles. Xiansheng’s words display a bias. Ever since Emperor Wu opened up maritime trade, how many foreign goods have made their way into our Great Liang? Even the farming puppets recently deployed in Jiangnan have foreign antecedents. As long as they’re capable, what does it matter if they’re foreigners from the East or West?”

He quickly warmed to his subject, bemoaning the state of the world and enumerating countless cases of abuses of power and systemic problems since the start of the Yuanhe reign. Chang Geng and Ge Pangxiao’s usual conversation partners were either that mysterious monk from the National Temple or the great scholar the Marquis Estate had hired at a high price in gold. They found this logical-sounding explanation quite refreshing—not a single word of it would stand up to scrutiny. The man was confidently spitting out rubbish while having no idea what he was talking about.

Gu Yun stopped speaking and only sneered. Within the time it took to burn a stick of incense, he seemed to lose patience and cut off the man's speech. "I came here with the sincere intention to join your cause, yet the lord has found a talking puppet to waste my time. How very disheartening."

A spasm crossed that middle-aged man's face.

Without another word, Gu Yun pulled Chang Geng to his feet. "In that case, we'll be taking our leave."

"Wait! Zhang-xiansheng, wait!" the man called out.

Gu Yun ignored him. But before he could take a step, the guards at the door split down the middle, and a tall, thin man in a long cloak strode in. "Zhang-xiansheng, am I qualified to speak with you?" he asked in a ringing voice.

The middle-aged man trotted over to the tall and thin man's side and said to Gu Yun, "This is our Huang Qiao, Commander Huang. He is a crucial figure here, so we had to verify your identity—please take no offense."

Chang Geng frowned. He found the name "Huang Qiao" slightly familiar and was about to relay the whole message in Gu Yun's palm, but Gu Yun lightly squeezed his fingers, stopping him. Gu Yun, who was still deaf as anything a few moments ago, somehow managed to hear the man's words with his own ears.

"Commander Huang," said Gu Yun in a low voice, "commander in chief of the Jiangnan Army and Navy, lower-second rank…I am well and truly surprised."

As he spoke, he slowly removed that strip of black cloth. His uncovered eyes shone like the morning star rising in the east—how could anyone think he was blind? He tugged his arm out of Chang Geng's grip and waved off the worried young man with a roguish smile. "Hey, Commander Huang, when I served at old General Du's side, you were still an assistant regional commander. It's been so long—do you still remember me?"

# Chapter 34:
# Truth and Lies

THE DOOR OF THE IRON CAGE clicked open with the sixth key Cao Niangzi tried. “Quick, everyone out.”

The prisoners inside had turned into startled birds all shrinking back in fear at the sight of the rod in his hands. An old man in his sixties appeared to be the leader among them. He offered a trembling bow and said, “Young General, we are merely a group of artificers captured by the rebel army. We’re not part of their rebellion; you must tell that to Marquis Gu in your report.”

Cao Niangzi swiftly strapped the iron rod to his back and said, “The marquis knows everything. There’s just one task with which we could use your assistance.”

On this unremarkable little ship, a bunch of barefooted and battered artificers poured out of the jail cell, supporting each other as they walked. Every one of them jumped into the ocean and swam off in a different direction.

The trembling of the deck under their footsteps woke the guard, who arose with a series of groans only to get another strike to the face. After completing his task, Cao Niangzi looked down at this guard, hands on his hips. He found it unbelievable—when beautiful men fainted, they looked perfectly pitiful, like the collapse of a jade mountain. Such a sight inspired tender feelings of affection. So why was it that when ugly men fainted, their eyes all rolled up into their skulls like this?

He shook his head and muttered to himself, “Incomprehensible.”

Holding his nose, Cao Niangzi dragged the man into the jail cell and locked it with a *click*. Job done, he too made his escape.

On the flagship of the fleet, Gu Yun stood with his hands behind his back and a look of perfect composure on his face. Despite having only two

young subordinates at his side, he gazed at the armed and armored soldiers before him with an assured half-smile.

Anyone might fail to recognize a person they had last seen as a teenager of fifteen or sixteen at first glance, even more so after years on the battlefield had so completely transformed their disposition.But as long as the individual in question hadn't suffered any major disfigurement, their features wouldn't have changed much, even after all this time.

At Gu Yun's words, a look of shock came over Huang Qiao's face. He looked carefully at him for a moment, then sucked in a sharp breath and took a step back. "You, you are—"

Gu Yun gripped a Dongying katana he had snatched in the earlier scuffle and casually tested its balance. He used the discarded blindfold to tie up his loose hair, then said with a smile, "What a surprise, it looks like Commander Huang has recognized me after all."

The dignified bearing with which Huang Qiao had offered enlistment to the talents of the world disappeared in a flash as he began to tremble uncontrollably like he'd been cursed. "Gu, Gu…"

Gu Yun replied, "Mm, it's Gu Yun. Long time no see."

Before he finished speaking, one of the soldiers lost his grip on his weapon in fright, and it dropped to the floor with a clang. The cabin was silent except for the white-clothed pipa player in the corner, who played without a single missed note as if she'd heard nothing at all. The melody of the Jiangnan tune "Song of Homebound Fishermen" seemed rather incongruous in this sort of atmosphere.

"Impossible!" The middle-aged man who had been so confidently spouting nonsense only moments ago blurted out, "The Marquis of Anding is in the northwest suppressing raiders, how could…"

"If you're going to rebel, you should read some more books." Gu Yun looked at him and offered some earnest advice. "The East Sea doesn't have the budget to maintain hawks, but you must have at least heard of them before?"

Outside the cabin, a series of screams pierced the night air. Someone swung a lantern around to illuminate the area, only to see several black shadows flash across the deck like ghosts. They alighted then darted away,

slaying a person each time they touched down, like plucking feathers from a passing goose.

“Black Hawks! It’s the Black Hawks!”

“Im…impossible! Shut your mouth!” Huang Qiao shouted, “How could the Black Iron Battalion be in the East Sea? How could the Marquis of Anding be here? Arrows! Shoot these imposters down with parhelion arrows!”

“Sir, look out!”

The Black Hawks swept overhead, loosing arrows like rain. The rebel fighters on the deck covered their heads and darted about like rats as the scene descended into chaos. The pipa player in the corner remained unmoving. She plucked at her strings and adeptly switched the tune to “Ambush from All Sides,” quite befitting of the scene.

Huang Qiao’s eyes nearly bugged out of his head. “So what if Gu Yun is here? I refuse to believe he could have brought the Black Iron Battalion all the way from the desert! Cut him down, and let’s see who else that wretched emperor has to rely on! Attack!”

The soldiers unsheathed their weapons and glared balefully at the three figures encircled in their midst. Ge Pangxiao flinched, and furtively tugged on Chang Geng’s arm. Under the cover of the music, he whispered, “Dage, they’re right! What do we do?”

Before Chang Geng could reply, Gu Yun rapped his knuckles on Ge Pangxiao’s forehead through the scattered hair that had fallen across it, smiled broadly, and said, “That’s right, I only have these few Black Hawk guards at my side. Well said, Commander Huang, you have both courage and insight!”

Ge Pangxiao blinked. “Dage, that’s not right. The marquis is quite confident.”

Chang Geng said nothing.

Brandishing their weapons, the row of soldiers shuffled back and forth like a human wave, rising and falling like the tide—but not one of them dared advance.

Ge Pangxiao was woozy with confusion. *Does the marquis have backup or not?*

Though Chang Geng wasn't so conceited as to call himself smart, he usually did think a bit more than Ge Pangxiao. But now, he found himself just as confused. *Is he deaf or not?*

The incomprehensible Marshal Gu strode toward Huang Qiao with a labyrinthine smile, completely ignoring the dithering soldiers surrounding him. "If I recall correctly, Commander Huang was taught by Chang Zhilu, the maternal uncle of Prince Wei. When the late emperor passed, Prince Wei failed to take command of the Imperial Guard—so what, now he's trying to take a naval route?"

In a flash, Chang Geng recalled that when Gu Yun escorted him back to the capital back then, he had dragged nearly half the Black Iron Battalion along with him. He'd left the troops right outside the walls, swords pointed at the capital. And when they hurried to the palace, they had seen Prince Wei and the crown prince—now the emperor—kneeling outside the late emperor's chambers. Gu Yun had even stopped to greet them. Thinking on it now, that had indeed been quite the meaningful greeting.

So Prince Wei had been planning a coup, but only stopped because Gu Yun rushed back to the capital?

Gu Yun's words were like a bolt of lightning to Huang Qiao, who at once thought all his plots had been exposed. How had the emperor noticed Prince Wei's intentions—had they slipped up in the capital, or had one of their own here in the Liangjiang area turned traitor? But these questions no longer mattered. He only knew that Gu Yun was here, and he was dead.

Never would it have occurred to Huang Qiao that Gu Yun was only making wild guesses based on vague knowledge of the mentorship affiliations among the military generals of the imperial court.

Ge Pangxiao was stupefied. *What? The marquis knew Prince Wei was planning to revolt?!*

Chang Geng's hand came to rest on his sword.

Knowing his own death was near, Huang Qiao threw caution to the wind. Fury swirled in his gut as he roared and launched himself at Gu Yun with murder in his eyes. In the corners of the room, a few iron puppets that

had originally been set up as decorations let out furious bellows and raised their weapons.

Chang Geng leapt out from behind Gu Yun and blocked Huang Qiao's sword before Gu Yun could react. "Commander," he said grimly, "I'd appreciate a demonstration of your skills."

Their master had led the charge, so the underlings behind him had no more excuse to retreat, no matter how frightened they were. They charged forward in a single rush, pouring into the tiny cabin.

Ge Pangxiao groped around in his clothing but found nothing he could use to protect himself, so he scrambled behind Gu Yun. Gu Yun held the Dongying sword horizontally across his chest and flicked away a strike aimed at him with a sweep of the narrow blade. He grinned. "Shh, do you hear that?"

He had perfected the skill of acting mysterious to an even greater degree than the skills of the battlefield. No one could resist the urge to prick up their ears and listen. Chang Geng's sword dragged across Huang Qiao's blade with a piercing screech. Without warning, the young man expressionlessly kicked out and struck Huang Qiao in the waist. The man howled and collapsed against the foot of an iron puppet who, having no concept of friend or foe, chopped at everyone it saw. Huang Qiao cut a sorry figure scrambling around as he attempted to avoid its strikes.

The plucking of strings echoed through the cabin—who knew what that woman was thinking, but she now switched from "Ambush on All Sides" to "Phoenix's Courtship Song."

Everyone could hear the quiet roar of the waves and the whoosh of Black Hawks swooping overhead. Gradually, everyone's faces transformed as a new sound swelled in the dark. They heard battle cries, whistles, and the sound of drums…as if an army of thousands had surrounded them from all sides!

Huang Qiao was frozen in shock. He couldn't help but recall the hair-raising rumors about the Black Iron Battalion—past the northern border, as the sky was darkened by snowstorms, and sheep and wolves alike trembled on the endless, oppressive plains, an army of wraithlike soldiers arrived on the gale winds in iron armor as dark as crow feathers, white smoke roiling in their wake. When they broke through the winds, even gods and ghosts would shrink in fear…

The lights on the decks of the large fleet of sea dragons began to go dark one by one. The rumbling of the ships' engines went silent as their propulsion was cut, as if some invincible beast was swallowing down these helpless sea dragons in the darkness. The soldiers and Dongying fighters fell into disarray. Suddenly an enormous firework erupted above the fleet, lighting up half the sky. Some sharp-eyed person cried out in fear, "The Black Iron Battalion!"

In the fading light of the fireworks, the men on deck saw that a contingent of warriors in pitch-black heavy armor had already boarded the flagship. The one in the lead turned, his eyes like flashes of lightning.

Inside the cabin, Chang Geng swiftly pressed forward and swung down at Huang Qiao from above. Ge Pangxiao's eyes swiveled. He pulled out an iron sphere the size of a large pill from his lapels and tossed it at Huang Qiao's feet. "Dage, I'll lend you a hand!"

The iron sphere seemed to gain speed on its own as it shot toward Huang Qiao. Commander Huang immediately lost his footing. He managed to fend off only a few strikes before Chang Geng's sword struck him hard on the wrist and he collapsed to the floor with a cry. That little iron sphere, meanwhile, flew out from the crowd, bounced from the deck, roared upward, and exploded in midair with a final flourish.

Chang Geng swung his arm back and embedded his sheath in the chest of an oncoming iron puppet. He gave a final twist and a push. The iron puppet creaked a few times, then fell still.

"Yifu," he called out, "the ringleader has been apprehended."

Gu Yun laughed. "The real ringleader remains in the imperial court." He turned and walked toward the cabin door as if the soldiers and puppets still in the room did not exist. Astonishingly, no one dared to stop him.

Black Hawks circled over the deck. Gu Yun produced a palm-sized iron token from his lapels and tossed it into the air. One of the Black Hawks deftly caught it and alighted on the mast high above. Commandeering the sea dragon's copper squall, the soldier called in a clear voice, "The rebel leader has been apprehended. The Black Iron Tiger Tally is here. If any soldiers of the Jiangnan Navy see this token and turn to the light, past misdeeds will be forgiven. Any who fail to heed this call will be executed on the spot!"

The Black Iron Tiger Tally was given to the Marquis of Anding by Emperor Wu. In times of emergency, it represented the authority to command the eight branches of the military. There were three tallies in total —Gu Yun held one, the court kept hold of another, and the emperor held the third.

The thirty-some imprisoned artificers had swum up and cut the propulsion systems of over half the sea dragons from the water, and the lines of communication had collapsed. The majority of the rebel army was made up of the navy sailors Huang Qiao had brought with him, while the smaller part were miscellaneous troops recruited elsewhere. When the rebel soldiers heard the Black Hawk's proclamation, they roiled like a boiling pot. Some put up a stubborn resistance while others turned their coats on the spot. Even more were simply bewildered. The terrified Dongying people turned on their own comrades, and the rebel troops began fighting with their own for no good reason.

Lights blazed on the flagship as Chang Geng pushed Huang Qiao out before him, fully trussed up. Seeing that the tide had turned, the rebel soldiers on the flagship threw down their weapons one after another. That insouciant musician inside the cabin was still playing. She had by this time performed an untold number of songs, each played in perfect tune.

Gu Yun's face was calm as a still pond in the faint light. Chang Geng stared at him in confusion. He figured Gu Yun must have encountered plenty of situations like this, but he still wondered where that Black Iron army had materialized from.

It was easy to hide a couple of Black Hawks, but a whole army? And how had he brought the Black Iron army all the way from the northwestern

desert? And finally—was he pretending to be deaf, or pretending *not* to be deaf?

Standing there on the deck, even Chang Geng couldn't help but think Gu Yun must have known Prince Wei would rebel a long time ago, and that he had set his sights on the East Sea Navy and lain in wait till they had all their ships and armaments prepared, ready to take them out in one incisive strike.

A familiar rumbling could be heard in the distance. Yao Zhen had finally mobilized the Jiangnan Navy, and their giant dragons took to the sea. The silhouette of a giant kite already loomed in midair. Gu Yun communicated with the Black Hawks in the sky through simple hand signals. At his orders, one of them sped off to the giant kite with the Black Iron Tiger Tally in hand to take command of the navy Yao Zhen had dispatched.

Huang Qiao squeezed his eyes shut—it was over.

The unceasing music finally stopped. Holding her pipa, the white-clothed musician unhurriedly strolled out from the cabin and glanced down at the tied-up Huang Qiao.

Huang Qiao glared at her and rasped out, "Chen Qingxu, even you will betray me now?"

Chen Qingxu gave him a bemused look, then swept coolly past him. Her face was like a painted mask—she was expressionless when offering wine, expressionless when playing the pipa, expressionless when listening to the sounds of slaughter, expressionless when enduring the interrogation of others. She strolled up to Gu Yun.

"Marquis."

Gu Yun promptly dropped his arrogant attitude. "Many thanks for your assistance, miss. I don't know if you and old Chen Zhuo-xiansheng are…"

Chen Zhuo was the miracle doctor who had prescribed Gu Yun his medicine many years ago.

"He is my grandfather," Chen Qingxu said, then added pointedly, "The winds are high on the ocean. You had best go sit inside the cabin."

Gu Yun knew she was reminding him about the headaches that came as a side effect of the medicine. He gave her a wan smile but said nothing. Seeing that he had rejected her advice, Chen Qingxu wasted no more words, but merely curtsied and said, “May the world prosper in peace, and may all here today enjoy long and healthy lives.”

“Many thanks,” said Gu Yun again.

Chen Qingxu turned to disembark from the boat. Perhaps she was tired after her performance, but she didn’t even spare a glance for the rebel army embroiled in battle around her.

Ge Pangxiao watched her go. “Eh, they’re all tangled up with each other in a fight at the end of that gangway. Why did that jiejie just leave like that?”

Gu Yun frowned and was about to call out to her when a Dongying warrior charged out onto the gangway and opened his mouth to blow a hidden dart at her. From midair, a Black Hawk immediately nocked an arrow and took aim, and the Dongying man dropped into the ocean. Chen Qingxu stepped lightly to the side, as if she was dancing along to the rhythm of the swaying gangway, and the Dongying dart narrowly brushed past her body, burying itself into the iron gangway with a *clang*. She didn’t even look up as she floated away like a fluttering ghost in white.

Ge Pangxiao blinked. Sure enough, every weirdo in this nation belonged to the Linyuan Pavilion.

By the time the giant kite and dragons arrived on the scene, the rebel army had already made quite a mess of themselves. The Black Hawks escorted their prisoners from the flagship, and the regular army began mopping up the rest. In the midst of all this, a Black Carapace soldier charged onto the flagship and flipped up his visor. Chang Geng was shocked to discover that this person was Liao Ran.

Great Master Liao Ran was clearly even less familiar with heavy armor than the barbarians who had attacked Yanhui Town. Though mechanical augmentation provided him with incredible strength, he wove back and forth as he walked and couldn’t control his limbs properly as he ran, moving in fits and starts like a valiant but clumsy rabbit. He barely kept

his balance by grabbing on to the railing and nearly fell to his knees. Upon closer inspection, the “Black Carapace” he was wearing was shedding its color to reveal ghostly pale metal beneath, and he was shrouded in a bewitching, fishy scent.

So this was the “Black Iron Battalion” that had scared the rebel army out of its wits! Then where had all the battle cries come from? Ventriloquist stunts?

Chang Geng silently ground his teeth. He felt like Gu Yun had tricked him once again.

Liao Ran raised his two mechanical arms with difficulty and attempted to sign, but his control was too poor and he couldn’t manage to separate his fingers. He swayed like a strand of seaweed, but no one could understand what he was saying. He gestured around until his forehead was covered in sweat, struggling inside his heavy armor.

Staring blankly, Ge Pangxiao observed, “My lord, the great master seems to have some urgent report.”

Gu Yun turned to look. “It’s nothing. That idiot can’t get out; go help him take the armor off.”

Ge Pangxiao didn’t know what to say. Stuck inside the heavy armor, the monk stared innocently back at him. Ge Pangxiao sucked in a breath. “Great Master, aren’t you an expert in all sorts of steel armors and engines?”

The monk couldn’t speak and couldn’t sign, so he could only use his unusually lively eyes to express his meaning. *Expert doesn’t mean I know how to wear them. I’m a monk, not a soldier.*

Ge Pangxiao ended up having to manually remove the heavy armor from the outside with Chang Geng’s help. Liao Ran tumbled out and didn’t spare even a second to neaten himself up before walking over to Gu Yun and signing with a serious countenance, “Marshal, the Jiangnan Navy has arrived. Commissioner Yao is on the kite. No matter what, you ought to go inside to rest.”

Chang Geng started, sensing some meaning hidden within these words. His head whipped around to look at Gu Yun, who was still perfectly poised as if nothing was the matter.

Gu Yun didn’t remain stubborn this time but made a brief sound of assent and turned back to the cabin, still playing with his stolen Dongying sword. Chang Geng hurried after him.

At that moment, the snakelike Dongying man crept up to them through the shadows of the deck, faint light gleaming off the silk darts strapped to his wrists. The snake-man twisted his mouth into a smile as he watched for the instant Gu Yun was about to step inside the cabin. Seizing his chance, he launched six silk darts from both wrists at once, all hurtling straight for Gu Yun.

A Black Hawk swooped down with a screech.

Chang Geng instinctively threw himself forward to protect Gu Yun, but the sensation of the ocean breeze cleaved by sharp blades reached Gu Yun’s skin first. He pulled Chang Geng to him and yanked both of them a few steps aside. The Dongying sword in his hands whipped up in an arc. Three silk darts struck the blade, shattering it into three broken shards. Gu Yun tossed it away, sleeves flying, and rolled nimbly to the side with Chang Geng in his arms. The silk darts sliced through the dark cloth tying up his hair as the Black Hawk’s arrow killed the snake-man in a single blow.

Gu Yun didn’t take this minor interruption to heart. He patted Chang Geng and calmly said, “Just a little loose end, no matter.” He reached for Chang Geng’s shoulder to push himself to his feet, only for his legs to buckle beneath him.

Scared out of his wits, Chang Geng caught Gu Yun in his arms. His hand accidentally brushed Gu Yun’s back, only to find that the man felt like he had just been fished out of the water—the clothes on his back were soaked through with cold sweat.

# Chapter 35:
# Troubled Heart

GU YUN DELIBERATELY slowed his breath, but at the end of each exhale, his body was overtaken by tremors. When he had been standing straight as a rod, no one could tell, but in Chang Geng's arms, it was as if the overwhelming pain was about to explode from his body. Gu Yun panted lightly for a moment, and after a nearly indiscernible grimace, looked up at Chang Geng with a crooked, haphazard smile and spat out a load of nonsense. "It's okay, it was just one Dongying ninja. There, there; I'll pet your hair, don't be scared—stop squeezing me so tight."

Seeing him like this, Chang Geng was torn between heartache and a strong desire to beat him to death.

Using the long scabbard of the Dongying sword for support, Gu Yun struggled to his feet again, every single blue vein popping from his deathly pale hands like they were about to burst through the skin. Gu Yun had been able to tell with a careful sniff that Chen Qingxu had mixed his usual medicine into the bowl of wine she offered. After weighing his options of "deaf and blind" or "splitting headache, but able to see," he had quickly chosen the latter.

The truth was, Gu Yun wouldn't have been majorly impeded even if he didn't drink it. After all, he couldn't have known ahead of time that the Linyuan Pavilion's "musician" just happened to be Miracle Doctor Chen's granddaughter. But when that bowl of medicine was right under his nose, he was unable to overcome the need for control that had been carved into his bones.

Gu Yun had to admit that Shen Yi was right. He knew that one day, he would have to make peace with his broken body. But knowing wasn't the same as doing—even if he was capable of living well enough without relying on his sight or hearing.

Any disability ceased to be an impairment once one became habituated to it. But to achieve such an end, the old marquis had stolen away the most carefree days of his childhood. Even though things had

changed over the years, perhaps he still held onto some lingering frustrations.

But those frustrations would have to be slowly ground away by the passage of time. Over the bumpy course of his interactions with Chang Geng within the past few years, Gu Yun's resentment toward the previous generation had already faded significantly. Although he would never be as strict with Chang Geng as the former marquis had been with him, he had gradually begun to understand his fatherly intentions.

Perhaps every resentment and grudge in the world would dissolve before the combined powers of forgetfulness and empathy.

Through clenched teeth, Chang Geng said, "I won't."

Not only did he not let go, he tightened his arms around Gu Yun, sticking to him like glue as he "helped" Gu Yun all the way into the cabin.

Mystified, Gu Yun asked, "Have you developed yet another way of acting spoiled?"

"I must have been scared to death by that Dongying man," Chang Geng ground out in a sardonic retort.

Gu Yun had nothing to say to that.

*Calm down,* Chang Geng willed himself, *just calm down a bit.* He forced himself to breathe as he helped Gu Yun take a seat in the ringleader's chair, shifting him into a comfortable position. Chang Geng examined Gu Yun's complexion with a frown, then asked in a whisper next to his ear, "Yifu, where does it hurt?"

Gu Yun knew he couldn't hide it this time, so, flagrant shamelessness it was. He beckoned Chang Geng over. Chang Geng leaned in, face serious.

"It's that time of the month," Gu Yun said in a hushed voice. "My stomach is sore and bloated."

Chang Geng didn't realize what he meant at first. "Huh, what?"

Then it clicked, and his face went red with a *fwoosh*—out of embarrassment or rage, who could say. Gu Yun's head hurt so badly he wanted to bash it into a wall, but Chang Geng's tender little face was just too adorable. Laughing through the pain, he reflected that pranks made quite an effective painkiller.

Flame practically shot from Chang Geng's eyes as he glared at him in fury.

Gu Yun, who had years of practice offering a head pat after every tease, coughed and switched to a more serious tone. "I didn't have a chance to eat anything yet tonight, and Miss Chen gave me a bowl full of cold wine. My stomach hurts, but it's nothing serious."

This sounded reasonable at first, but every soldier got used to going hungry while on the front lines. How could someone as tough as Marshal Gu have the face to pretend he was such a delicate flower?

Every effort Chang Geng had expended to remain composed fizzled away like bubbles popping on the wind. On the verge of exploding in anger, he blurted out, "Gu Shiliu, you—!"

Even after stuttering out a whole string of "you"s, he was unable to decide how to continue scolding him.

Gu Yun burst out laughing and patted Chang Geng's head. "What, you're grown now and suddenly understand you should care about your yifu? Looks like I haven't doted on you all these years for nothing."

His palm was like the sky pressing down over Chang Geng's head, smothering his towering fires of rage and leaving nothing but an insignificant wisp of smoke, helpless and powerless before its own extinction.

*Who the hell would care for you?* Chang Geng thought to himself. *Not a single honest word out of your mouth, and why should I bother worrying? It's not like you're going to keel over dead.*

But the sight of Gu Yun in pain made his eyes hurt. Chang Geng could control his words and his thoughts, but he had no control over the worry in his heart. He sulked to himself for a while, then sighed and circled around behind that grand chair. He placed his hands on Gu Yun's temples and began to massage them methodically, face still gloomy from their argument.

Seeing that Gu Yun's shoulders were relaxed, Chang Geng could tell it wasn't his chest or stomach that hurt. His arms and legs were also perfectly mobile, and anyway, a minor flesh wound on his limbs wouldn't leave him in this much pain. By process of elimination, it was most likely a

headache—Chang Geng remembered this had happened once on their way from Yanhui Town to the capital. As he continued his ministrations, Chang Geng couldn't help but snipe, "Yifu, last time you told me it was a migraine. Did you forget?"

Gu Yun was silent.

He had indeed forgotten. The lies he had told over the course of his lifetime were enough to fill an ocean, and if he bothered to remember every single one, his head would have no room left for anything else.

"Hm?"

"My head hurts too. Isn't it all because I'm pouring out my entire heart and soul in service to Great Liang, exhausting myself and fretting to the point of illness?"

He said this without the slightest blush. Chang Geng's temper fizzled out entirely out of sheer awe.

Then Gu Yun pulled out his finishing move—conking out. He closed his eyes and focused on enjoying Chang Geng's services, regretting only that the situation hadn't been fully wrapped up outside, so he had to keep an ear out and couldn't actually fall sleep right then and there.

At first, Chang Geng was wholly focused on massaging Gu Yun's acupoints, but as he continued, his gaze involuntarily landed on Gu Yun's face. Once you got used to someone's face, it didn't really matter much whether they were good-looking or ugly. Even the monk's bewitchingly pretty face didn't seem much different to him than Uncle Wang's after he'd become accustomed to his presence—not to mention, Uncle Wang had much better hygiene than that monk.

Gu Yun was the only exception.

Gu Yun hadn't put his hair back up after the Dongying man scattered it. It spread scandalously over his body like fallen flowers swirling away in flowing water, but with Gu Yun's dissolute habits, he didn't care at all. After staring at him for far too long, all those dreams Chang Geng had shoved deep in the back of his mind involuntarily floated to the surface, and his thoughts began to run wild.

The wu’ergu stirring restlessly within his body wove an unspeakable dreamscape before his eyes.

He saw himself bend down and kiss Gu Yun’s forehead, brow, nose… all the way down to his lips. Those lips surely wouldn’t be very soft, or very sweet—they would probably even be bitter, like the medicinal scent that never faded from his body. Or perhaps they would carry the fragrance of alcohol. Chang Geng also very much wanted to bite him. As soon as this idea took form, he could almost taste the faintly sweet tang of blood on his tongue, and his entire body began to tremble. Chang Geng shivered violently, then snapped back to his senses—as he stood behind Gu Yun’s chair in a daze, he had bitten down on his own tongue.

Chang Geng realized his fingers were still hovering by Gu Yun’s ears and yanked them back as if burned. He stood there frozen for a moment, then called out quietly through unsteady breaths, “Yifu?”

Gu Yun was deep in his act of pretending to be asleep, so he did not open his eyes—and never saw the bloody gleam which had yet to leave Chang Geng’s. Chang Geng gave him a deep look, picked up his sword, and fled from the cabin.

Outside, the ocean wind whipped across the deck. Above, the Black Hawks on guard wheeled over the flagship, and below, the Jiangnan Navy was cleaning up the battlefield in an orderly fashion at Yao Zhen’s command. The Dongying people, scattered after losing their leader, had jumped in the ocean to clamber into skiffs or swim away. The surrounding sea dragons cast hidden nets into the water and caught a whole school of them who swam right into the traps. The tied-up Huang Qiao had been personally escorted to Yao Zhen, who was not far away, and Yao Zhen was now bending down with a contemplative look to speak to him. Chang Geng’s eyes skimmed over all these scenes, but he paid no mind to any of them. He let the burning heat on his face and body drift away in the ocean wind.

That particular penetrating and damp chill of the ocean quietly burrowed its way into his marrow. Frozen to the bone, facing the great sea, Chang Geng said to himself, *You beast.*

There was no way he could stay in the Marquis Estate or at Gu Yun’s side any longer.

Two days later, the peach trees blossomed in Commissioner Yao's estate, enveloping the entire residence in fragrant mist. Gu Yun sat at the window munching on sunflower seeds as he waited for Yao Zhen to pen a memorial to the emperor. An incident as major as this must of course be reported to the court. Once all the ringleaders had been named, there would be a lengthy investigation. Who knew how large the case would become, or how many major figures would be implicated. Perhaps a storm would be coming to the capital.

Yao Zhen set down his brush. The man looked like he hadn't slept in days. "My lord, how do you think we should go about reporting this?"

"Just say the Regional Judiciary Commissioner discovered something afoot at sea and secretly sent people to investigate, overturning their plot before the rebel army could fully take shape," Gu Yun replied absently.

"No, no," Yao Zhen hurriedly rebutted him. "I am a mere scholar; I get seasick if I step onto a dragon and airsick if I step onto a kite. I was throwing up the whole way over. How can I claim this great accomplishment for myself? It was all your doing, entering the enemy camp alone and pulling back the force of the tide."

Gu Yun smiled. "I was far away in the northwest. Could it be that I have the ability to appear anywhere in an instant? It was Commissioner Yao who was quick and resourceful on the battlefield, who ordered his soldiers to don black armor to intimidate the rebel army and send them into a panic. What an admirable plan."

"I'm not doing it!" Yao Zhen blurted out. "Don't trouble me like this, my lord."

Commissioner Yao was thirty-six, in the prime of a man's life. He had two spirited bunches of whiskers on his face, and a clever and capable sort of mien. His career as an official had been full of ups and downs, yet he'd always refused to leave this fertile region. He'd accomplished absolutely nothing in his lifetime, though he had a wonderful talent for sleeping in for a whole day and night.

As time went on, everyone forgot his origins: In the twelfth year of Yuanhe, when Gu Yun's teacher Lin Mosen was still living, this great

scholar had been the head examiner of the imperial examination. Upon reading Yao Zhen's essay, he slapped the desk and shouted in approval, and proceeded to present the essay to the Yuanhe Emperor. Thus, Yao Zhen, courtesy name Yao Chongze, had been granted the title of Zhuangyuan—first place in the imperial examination—by the emperor's own hand.

"You don't want credit for an achievement as great as halting a rebellion in the East Sea, thereby preventing a great war which threatened the safety of the capital before it could even begin?" Gu Yun said meaningfully. "A future in which you are considered as good a general as a minister is within reach, Commissioner Yao."

Yao Zhen snorted. "I'll only bite off as much as I can chew. I'm a mere low-level official with neither talent nor virtue. I am content to tend to my corner of the world and live the rest of my life in comfort. I lack the ability to ride the wind and clouds. Please, spare me."

Gu Yun shook his head. "And here I was planning to submit a memorial to the emperor and request you come to the northwest as Army Inspector."

Yao Zhen bowed down with his arms over his head. "I have an eighty-year-old mother and young children crying to be fed. I beg this hero to spare my sorry life. If you see anything you like in my home, just go ahead and take it."

Gu Yun was at a loss for words.

"How about this? Seeing as this happened in our jurisdiction, Governor Zhou of Liangjiang can't avoid getting involved. I'll go talk it over with him," Yao Zhen began with a fawning smile. Registering the displeased look on Gu Yun's face, he hastily added, "That's right, there's also the little prince. His Highness was journeying through Jiangnan and stumbled across the rebel army kidnapping military artificers and pressing them into service. Encountering injustice before his very eyes, he infiltrated their encampment on his own and coordinated with our army from inside, finally capturing their leader with his own hands. What do you think about that?"

As soon as he heard this, Gu Yun went silent in thought.

Although the emperor wouldn’t say it outright, he still had his reservations about Chang Geng’s origins. Now, it looked like this incident would implicate Prince Wei, and the emperor was sure to be grievously disappointed. If he saw this youngest brother he’d heretofore ignored standing clearly on his side, perhaps he would be willing to set aside the grudges of the previous generation. Chang Geng was nearly of an age to be bestowed his own title of nobility. If he could count on the emperor’s favor, perhaps he would have an easier road to walk in the future.

Gu Yun weighed his options, then shot Yao Zhen a glare. This person was truly talented—if not, he wouldn’t have been able to maintain such a long friendship with the Marquis of Anding after a single meeting—but he was also truly unambitious. His pursuits consisted of lazing about, using his brains and talents to bribe superiors and subordinates alike, growing out his whiskers, and fawning over others.

Yao Zhen smiled. “My lord, what do you think?”

Gu Yun waved him off, wrapped his outer robe around himself, and rose to leave. He planned to leave Jiangnan in secret. Both the Linyuan Pavilion and the Black Iron Battalion had been embroiled in this incident, but neither wanted to publicize their involvement. The fabrication of a sensible tale would be left to Yao Zhen’s brush.

As Gu Yun stepped outside, he caught sight of Chang Geng carving a bamboo flute in the courtyard. Ge Pangxiao, Cao Niangzi, and Yao Zhen’s two young daughters surrounded him. With patient and clever hands, Chang Geng carved two little bamboo flutes, each a quite legitimate-looking instrument. The girls, no more than seven or eight years old, hopped and skipped in circles around him.

Just seeing him lifted Gu Yun’s spirits. Although he never said as much aloud, he had always hoped Chang Geng would grow into someone who was keen but didn’t flaunt his sharpness; someone who was righteous and kind but not weak and irresolute. He hoped for him to neither be as cowardly as his father, nor as radical as his mother.

Chang Geng had grown into exactly the person he had imagined without any intentional interference on his part. Even in appearance, he had inherited the best features of both his parents.

Gu Yun strolled over and plucked a freshly carved flute from Chang Geng's hands with a grin. "Do I get one too?"

Chang Geng's relaxed smile froze on his face. He took the flute back and handed it to one of the little girls staring at him in eager expectation. "It's just a child's toy, only a rough and simple thing. Yifu mustn't make fun of me."

Gu Yun stood speechless. He stared silently at the little girl's flute and thought to himself, *But I want one too.*

The child, whose head didn't even reach Gu Yun's waist, clutched the flute in her hands and shoved them behind her back, fearlessly staring up into Marshal Gu's eyes.

Chang Geng set aside his tools and signaled for Ge Pangxiao and Cao Niangzi to keep the little girls amused. He followed Gu Yun, and after settling his thoughts, asked, "Is Yifu planning to return to the northwest?"

Gu Yun nodded, in low spirits. "Mm. You'll go back and have an audience with the emperor on my behalf—Chongze will tell you what to say. Don't worry."

Chang Geng made a quiet noise of assent.

"You have performed a meritorious deed this time. The emperor may reward you," Gu Yun continued. "It's possible he'll allow you to attend court early. If you raise the matter, he may even allow you to join me in the northwest."

When they had met again this year, Chang Geng had already become an adult who could keep calm in the face of peril. His childish airs had disappeared, and Gu Yun's resolve to never bring him to the northwest had loosened. Now that the northwest enjoyed some approximation of peace, Gu Yun calculated that he could bring Chang Geng to the front lines to gain some experience. It wasn't like he needed to do anything while he was there, and any achievements would be counted in his favor when he returned to the court.

When Gu Yun left home, Chang Geng had been so determined to follow him to the northwest. Gu Yun thought he would be overjoyed to have his wishes fulfilled now. But Chang Geng only quietly paused mid-

stride. After a moment of silence, he said, “Yifu, I no longer wish to go to the Western Regions.”

# Chapter 36:
# Separation

THIS RAN ENTIRELY COUNTER to his expectations. Startled, Gu Yun blurted out, “Why?”

Chang Geng’s answer was well-reasoned and logical. “Yifu’s Black Iron Battalion is managing the situation in the Western Regions. If I go, I would only be a nuisance. What’s more, I would be troubling you to take pains to hand me some specious military achievements. There wouldn’t be much meaning to the whole affair.”

Though this analysis generally matched Gu Yun’s own thinking, hearing Chang Geng point it out to his face still felt like a bucket of cold water dumped over his head. Barely managing to master his expression, Gu Yun said, “Then…that’s good too. You can also return to the capital and begin attending court early. My teacher has some students there, you could get acquainted with them now…”

“Isn’t that just the same?”

As Chang Geng spoke, he looked toward the end of the covered walkway. The splendid sun of Jiangnan was dipping toward the horizon, setting all the spring flowers in the courtyard ablaze. He had heard from the servants in the Yao Estate that although these flowers were beautiful, they only bloomed for ten days to half a month and would wither not long after blossoming. And these were the ones carefully tended in a garden—if they blossomed in the deserted wilderness, they would quietly bloom, then quietly wither, the span of their lives a mere instant in the lifespan of the world. Perhaps a few wild birds and dumb beasts would pass by, but who would be there to observe their beauty?

Flowers were like this, and, by and large, all the meaningless love and hatred within a human heart…must be like this as well.

“Yifu,” continued Chang Geng, “Great Master Liao Ran knows many unique and talented people. I want to travel the world with them—of course, I won’t let it disrupt my studies and training…”

Before he had finished, Gu Yun's expression darkened and he interrupted. "No."

Chang Geng turned back to face him, gazing at him in silence.

In the shadow cast by the sun setting behind him, something inexplicable swirled in the young man's eyes. Gu Yun had never noticed it before, and seeing it now, he felt his heart begin to palpitate with unease. He realized he had been a bit harsh, and hastily relaxed his expression before continuing. "I don't mind if you go out to play. After you return to the capital, have Uncle Wang assign a few guards from the estate to accompany you around. But I have one rule—you mustn't go anywhere that doesn't have an imperial relay station, and you must send a letter assuring me of your safety at every relay station you come across."

"And go everywhere dressed finely and eating well, preening wherever I go?" Chang Geng said flatly. "In that case, I might as well go to the National Temple whenever I'm bored to join the madams and young ladies burning incense. At least that way you won't waste your money feeding all those people and horses."

Gu Yun was struck dumb. *This kid has learned how to talk back! And talk back with elegance, composure, and nasty hidden barbs, at that!*

The good mood coaxed out of Gu Yun by the fine spring scenery of Jiangnan evaporated without a trace. *And now I can't even get through to him? Have I spoiled him so much that he's totally out of control?*

"The roads through the jianghu are long, and human hearts are treacherous. What's so fun about that?" Impatience began to creep into his tone. "That monk hasn't done an honest day of work in his life, and his only skills are begging and running for his life. If something happens to you on the road, how will I explain myself to the late emperor?"

*Ah!* Chang Geng thought coldly to himself, *So it's all because you need to explain yourself to the late emperor. Well, if the late emperor found out from beneath the Nine Springs that I'm a little mongrel Xiu-niang dug up from who knows where to muddy the imperial bloodline, maybe he'd be furious enough to return to the living just to strangle me to death.*

Every glance at Gu Yun was another knife to the heart, another addition to his list of sins. He wished he could flee in shame that very

instant. But this man wouldn’t let him go. Chang Geng stared at the hopelessly clueless Gu Yun, and—for just a moment—a lingering and baseless resentment rose within his heart.

But he quickly came to his senses. Chang Geng pulled his gaze away from Gu Yun and said evenly, “Just a few days ago, Yifu told me that you would support me no matter what as long as I was certain of the road I wished to walk. Are you going back on your words so soon?”

“I said you have to think it through.” Gu Yun’s temper began to flare. “Is this what you call thinking it through?”

“This is exactly what I want to do,” Chang Geng said seriously.

“I won’t allow it. Think again! Come find me once you’re done.” Gu Yun didn’t want to lecture him out in the open, so he huffily turned and left with a flick of his sleeves.

Chang Geng swept away the flower petals that had landed on his shoulders as he watched Gu Yun’s retreating figure. Hearing footsteps from behind, he identified the newcomer without even turning his head. “Great Master Liao Ran, I apologize for the spectacle.”

Liao Ran had been afraid to come out earlier and hung back, eavesdropping for a while, until he saw Gu Yun leave. Only then did he feel safe to show himself. Trying to smooth things over, he signed, “The marquis only wants what’s best for you.”

Chang Geng looked down at his hands. They were now covered in a thin layer of calluses, but had yet to be weathered by scars. “I don’t want to live according to what he thinks best and become useless trash who must rely on him for everything.”

“Your Highness, I believe you are being rather unfair,” Liao Ran signed. “Even the sages grew up under their parents’ and elders’ protection when they were young. By your standards, isn’t everyone in the world useless trash? Great devices take longer to construct. You must avoid arrogance and impatience.”

Chang Geng said nothing. Clearly, he hadn’t taken these words to heart.

Liao Ran continued, “I see you are dispirited. This poison must have sunk down to the bone.”

Chang Geng flinched—for a second, he thought Liao Ran had found out about the wu’ergu. But Liao Ran continued, “Every person has a poison in their hearts. Some are more severe than others, but at your age, it ought not have overtaken you so completely. Your heart is too heavy with worries.”

Chang Geng laughed bitterly. “What do you know?”

Ever since that day in Yanhui Town, Chang Geng had felt that everything around him—his princely title, his false reputation, even Gu Yun—were things stolen for him by Xiu-niang. One day, someone would see that he was an ill match for these things, and his true nature would be revealed. He would lose everything. Gripped by such endless and extreme terror, Chang Geng felt like an eternal outsider in the capital.

Gu Yun had plotted out his future prospects as the fourth prince, but to Chang Geng, not a word of it felt real. When he looked in the mirror each day, he knew he was an earthworm writhing in the muck. Yet everyone else insisted on sticking horns on his head and pasting scales to his body, going to every effort to dress this sinuous little creature up as an imperial dragon. But no matter how many ornaments they placed on him, he still looked nothing like the real thing, and would always be only an uncouth worm. He might as well spare himself some embarrassment in the future and stay far away from it all.

Gu Yun was the only one who brought him such vivid joys and sorrows without an ounce of artifice. He would be lying to himself if he said he could put aside this relationship so lightly, yet he often found himself feeling unworthy of it.

Chang Geng didn’t spend long wallowing in self-pity. He gathered himself and asked, “That’s right, I wanted to ask you—what illness does my little yifu actually have? He acted very oddly on our trip into the East Sea, but he refuses to tell me anything.”

The monk shook his head. “Amitabha Buddha, I dare not say.”

Chang Geng furrowed his brow. “He goes around acting like he’s invincible, and now you’re helping him?”

“Is the marquis someone who feigns invincibility for no reason?” Liao Ran smiled. “If he’s unwilling to mention it himself, it’s not because he’s afraid others will know his weaknesses. It’s likely because this is his sore spot and the poison in his heart—and who would dare poke the Marquis of Anding in his sore spot? Your Highness, please spare my meager life.”

Chang Geng frowned in contemplation.

Having managed to sneak away from the desert for a few days, Gu Yun had planned to enjoy the scenery in Jiangnan. He thought he might go out and ride some horses, swim in some lakes, and admire some beauties—to have his fill of fun before he left. But Chang Geng’s words killed his mood, and he ended up holing himself up in his room. Looking at Chang Geng infuriated him, and looking at Yao Zhen made him mad too. Looking at Liao Ran especially left him in a furious rage.

Yao Zhen’s two unruly kids trilled on their flutes one after another without cease like a pair of chatty starlings, loud enough to be heard in the villages for miles around. The tuneless sound made Gu Yun remember how Chang Geng had plucked that flute right out of his hand, and that thought made him even angrier. Didn’t Chang Geng used to give anything he had to his godfather first? Why the sudden change of heart?

It was a pity that, although parents and children ought to be connected in fate through the blood they shared, the connection was in no way eternal. And when the child in question wasn’t even related by blood, what did they have left to hold them together?

That evening, a Black Hawk landed in Gu Yun’s courtyard. “Sir, a letter from General Shen.” Gu Yun sucked down his irritation and accepted the missive from the soldier, only to see that the chatterbox Shen Yi had written quite a concise letter. It contained only three words: “Emergency. Return posthaste.”

Since leaving the Lingshu Institute, Shen Yi had braved countless perils at Gu Yun’s side. What danger hadn’t he encountered? He would

never irritate Gu Yun by writing a letter to rush him like this unless it was serious.

“Sir, how should we…”

“I understand. No need to reply—we set out at first light.”

He hadn’t gotten through to Chang Geng at all. Gu Yun had planned to give him the cold shoulder for a few days before broaching the topic again, but Shen Yi’s urgent message gave him no choice. After pacing a few circles around his room, he got up to go find him.

Chang Geng was practicing with his sword in the courtyard. Gu Yun watched for a while, then suddenly drew the sword at the waist of a Black Hawk who had been accompanying him. The Black Hawk hadn’t removed his armor, and the heavy sword was as wide as a man’s palm. Gu Yun lifted it as easily as it were a feather duster. “Chang Geng, en garde!”

Before the challenge was out of his mouth, he had already lunged with the sword. Chang Geng caught the blow steadily, without retreating a single step.

*He’s improved,* Gu Yun thought, *and he has some strength in his arms now.*

He flexed his arms and pushed off Chang Geng’s sword, launching himself into a flip and swinging his blade in a great arc like the full moon. Chang Geng didn’t dare take this blow head-on and darted to the side, yet found himself unable to divert the momentum of his blade. In Gu Yun’s hand, that clumsy sword became as agile as a snake’s tongue, making three thrusts in quick succession. Chang Geng held his sword up across his chest to block, but he had already been backed into the corner of the courtyard. Turning aside, he darted up a column and twisted in midair, landing atop Gu Yun’s sword with one foot.

Gu Yun cheered him for the move, then dropped the sword hilt. Having lost his footing, Chang Geng tumbled. Gu Yun snatched the hilt back up and angled the blade down, pressing it against the young man’s shoulder as he struggled to rise. A layer of gooseflesh rose on Chang Geng’s neck from the gleam of the black iron.

Smiling, Gu Yun patted Chang Geng’s shoulder with the flat of the sword, then tossed it back to the Black Hawk behind him. “Not bad. You

haven’t been slacking in your training.”

Chang Geng rotated his slightly numb wrist. “I’m still far behind Yifu.”

Without an ounce of shame, Gu Yun said, “Mm, of course you’re still far behind me.”

Chang Geng stared at him in exasperation. Shouldn’t any normal person first say a few modest words, then give him some earnest pointers? Why’d he just take it and run with it? Chang Geng had never seen such an immodest godfather.

“If you come to the Northwestern Camp,” Gu Yun continued, “you could receive my personal instruction.”

So it was back to this. Chang Geng couldn’t help it—he burst out laughing. It was a strange thing, but when you really wanted something, desperate longing and every sort of tactic could still fail to bring it to you. Then, when you no longer wanted it, it would come banging on your door.

Chang Geng’s refusal was polite. “When I was living in the Marquis Estate, I once asked my shifu how Yifu became so skilled if he also completed all his martial training within the estate when he was younger. Shifu told me that the strength of one’s skills depends on how much effort one is willing to put in. With enough effort, and enough experience dancing with death on the battlefield, it doesn’t matter who taught you.”

Gu Yun’s smile faded.

“Yifu, I’ve thought it through, and I still want to go out and see the world.”

Gu Yun frowned. “Are the capital and the border not part of the world? What else do you want to see? Is Great Liang not enough to contain you? Do you wish to journey all the way to the Far West?”

For crying out loud, this father-son pair were at it again! Standing behind them, the Black Hawk didn’t dare make a sound—this mighty aerial killer hugged his sword, pretending he was a pile of coal someone forgot to put away.

Chang Geng fell silent, looking intensely at Gu Yun. For a split second, he very much wanted to retch up everything he had shoved down

into his heart right here in this courtyard. But he resisted the urge—when he imagined what Gu Yun's reaction might be, he concluded he might not be able to bear it.

"Don't say another word," Gu Yun said coldly. "I don't want to know where these bizarre ideas of yours came from. I'm telling that monk to beat it tomorrow, and you're going back to the capital. If you don't want to come to the northwest, then just stay at home—don't move a millimeter!"

Chang Geng wanted to scream at Gu Yun, *The Marquis Estate isn't my home!*

But as soon as these words reached his lips, he bit them in half and swallowed them back down. He was instinctively afraid that these words would wound Gu Yun's heart—even if he didn't know whether Gu Yun had a heart to wound.

"Yifu," Chang Geng said quietly, "I've put you through a lot of trouble by making you rush here from the northwest. I can't be sorry enough…but if you refuse to listen to reason, I can only be obstinate in response. If I could run once, I can run again. You can't watch me forever, and the guards at the estate can't stop me."

Gu Yun was insensible with rage. The Marquis Estate had always been his refuge. No matter how little he wanted to return to the capital, the thought of going home always gave him one thing to look forward to. Only now did he comprehend that to Chang Geng, that place was like a prison.

"Try me," he ground out.

The two parted in discord once again.

The Black Hawk chased after Gu Yun. He hadn't gotten very far, and uncaring of whether Chang Geng was still within earshot, he ordered tersely, "You needn't follow me back to the northwest tomorrow. Return to the capital with the fourth prince, and don't let him take a single step outside the city walls!"

"…Yes, sir."

The fire raging at these city gates not only brought calamity upon the innocent fish in the moat below, it even scorched the black hawk flying past into a bald chicken. What an unexpected disaster.

Early the next morning, Gu Yun left, still in a huff.

He didn't go to see Chang Geng again. On his way out, the devious Marquis of Anding snuck undetected into the courtyard occupied by Commissioner Yao's young daughters and stole the bamboo flute the little girl had left on the swing. When the child woke and found that the flute had disappeared, she sobbed for an entire day in anguish.

Gu Yun rushed back even faster than he'd left, and the first thing he said to Shen Yi upon landing was, "Prepare my medicine."

Shen Yi's expression was solemn. "Can you still hear?"

"I can," said Gu Yun, "But my ears are going. If you have something to say, make it quick."

Shen Yi pulled a few sheets of paper from his lapels. "This is the Desert Scorpion's personal testimony. I haven't shown it to anyone else; I performed the interrogation myself. I was waiting for your return to make the final call."

Gu Yun skimmed the pages at top speed as he walked. Suddenly, his steps paused, and he folded the papers in his hands. In that moment, his expression was a bit frightening.

The Desert Scorpion had only raided the Silk Road because the opportunity presented itself. His true objective was Loulan. The leader of the desert raiders supposedly possessed a treasure map of Loulan, and the so-called "treasure" was a thousand-hectare violet gold mine.

Shen Yi lowered his voice. "Sir, the implications of this are great. Do we report it to the court?"

"No," replied Gu Yun immediately. Rapidly turning the situation over in his head, he asked, "Where is this map?"

"The Desert Scorpion tattooed it onto his own stomach," revealed Shen Yi at a volume only the two of them could hear.

"He didn't say where he got it from?"

"It was stolen," Shen Yi said. "These desert raiders are arrogant and fearless. Central Plains people, residents of all the Western Regions

countries, Far Westerners—they rob everyone they meet, and they themselves don't even know which pile of loot the map came from."

Gu Yun mouthed an understanding "oh," squinted his eyes, which were beginning to go blurry, and gazed out at the rich splendor of Loulan's lights glowing in the distance. A young Loulan boy was watching him from afar, and, as if excited to have an audience, began to play his single-stringed zither from his perch on the city wall, beaming in Gu Yun's direction. Gu Yun had no time to play with these Loulan people who knew nothing but drink and leisure. He looked away and stuffed those folded up pieces of paper back into Shen Yi's hands. "Silence him."

Shen Yi's pupils contracted slightly.

"Silence him, destroy the body, and erase all the traces." Gu Yun's lips scarcely moved, all his words held between his teeth. "The rest of the desert raiders too. Just say the vicious raiders attempted to break out, and our soldiers had no choice but to slay them. This stays between you and me, so you'll be the only suspect if anything leaks. Now go investigate the origins of that treasure map immediately."

"Yes, sir."

After a pause, Shen Yi spoke up again, "Sir, there's been a rumor from the capital—Prince Wei has been placed under house arrest?"

Gu Yun shot him a look. "As you said, a rumor. Until we see an imperial edict, don't make random guesses. Go do your job."

Shen Yi made a sound of assent. Gu Yun stood in place and massaged the corners of his eyes, fatigue clear on his face. He hoped he was overreacting to the news of this mysterious treasure map. The dragon threat in the East Sea had yet to be put down, and now more trouble was appearing in the northwest. He had an unfortunate, nagging suspicion—this was no coincidence.

Half a month later, two memorials from Jiangnan arrived before the Longan Emperor, Li Feng.

Li Feng tapped on his desk. A man in his forties with a flowing beard was waiting beside him, and he quickly stepped up to adjust his gas lamp

brighter. This person was the emperor’s maternal uncle, Wang Guo, the most favored official in the imperial court.

Li Feng unfolded the first memorial. It contained the story Yao Zhen had arranged with Gu Yun—it erased the role of the Black Iron Battalion and the Linyuan Pavilion, flattered every single official in Jiangnan from top to bottom, and praised everyone’s merits to the skies. After reading it, the emperor said nothing. He picked up the second memorial.

This was a secret memorial, containing a story entirely different from the first. It said: “On the day of the engagement, the Marquis of Anding and several dozen Black Hawks and Black Carapaces appeared in the East Sea. They captured the ringleader. According to his testimony, there was a woman on the rebel army’s sea dragon whose behavior was strange. She is suspected to be of the Linyuan Pavilion, and an old acquaintance of Gu Yun.”

Li Feng read this report, too, in silence. He passed the two memorials to Wang Guo.

Imperial Uncle Wang rapidly skimmed through both, then carefully examined Li Feng’s turbulent expression, attempting to read his sovereign’s intentions before speaking. “This… Your Majesty, although the Marquis of Anding’s involvement amounted to a merit and no harm, abandoning his post without leave is…”

“His Black Hawks can fly a thousand kilometers in a day,” Li Feng said slowly, “and crossing the Central Plains is no more than a few days’ journey. Although he abandoned his post without leave, he has not gone too far out of line. Yet we do not understand how such a coincidence occurred. What role, exactly, did the Marquis of Anding play in this affair?”

Wang Guo’s eyelid twitched as he came to a realization.

Li Feng’s slender fingers drummed on the table. “Then there is the Linyuan Pavilion. This organization disappeared into the jianghu for years, so why have they suddenly resurfaced? And when did Gu Yun make contact with these people?”

The Linyuan Pavilion was invisible in prosperous times—their appearance signified impending chaos.

Wang Guo sucked in a deep breath. “Is His Majesty saying Gu Yun harbors traitorous—”

Li Feng cast him a sidelong glance. “What are you thinking?” he said with a faint smile. “Uncle Shiliu grew up with us since our youth and has performed a great service in putting down this rebellion. Won’t such a line of thought disillusion our loyal subjects?”

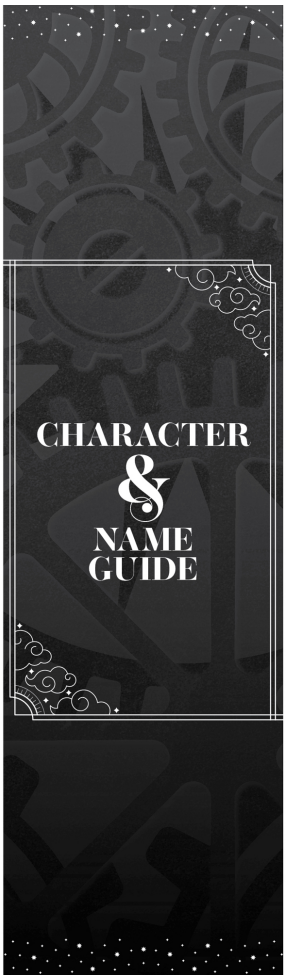
Wang Guo didn’t understand what he meant. He could only nod in agreement, not daring to add anything further.

“However—our imperial uncle must surely be exhausted from bearing the weight of the entirety of Great Liang and all four of its borders on his shoulders alone. Don’t you think it’s high time we found some others to share his burden?”

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

*Stars of Chaos*

VOLUME 2


CHARACTER
&
NAME
GUIDE

# CHARACTERS

*The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.*

*Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible readings presented for your reference, and not a definitive translation.*

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### Chang Geng

**MILK NAME:** Chang Geng (长庚 / “Evening star” or “Evening Venus”)

**GIVEN NAME:** Li Min (李旻 / Surname Li, “Autumn sky”)

**TITLE:** Prince Yanbei (雁北 / “Northern goose”)

Chang Geng spent nearly fourteen years living an uneventful life on the northern border, only for his world to be turned upside down when he learns he is actually the long-lost Fourth Prince of Great Liang.

### Gu Yun

**MILK NAME:** Shiliu (十六 / “Sixteen”)

**GIVEN NAME:** Gu Yun (顾昀 / Surname Gu, “Sunlight”)

**COURTESY NAME:** Gu Zixi (顾子熹 / Surname Gu; “Daybreak,” literary)

**TITLE:** Marquis of Anding (安定 / “Order”)

**RANK:** Marshal

Gu Yun begins the story in disguise as the handsome but useless Shen Shiliu, but soon reveals his true identity as the fearsome leader of the Black Iron Battalion.

## SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

### Shen Yi

**GIVEN NAME:** Shen Yi (沈易 / Surname Shen, “Change” or “Easy”)

**COURTESY NAME:** Shen Jiping (沈季平 / Surname Shen, “Season,” “Even” or “Peaceful”)

**RANK:** General

Gu Yun’s loyal friend and right-hand man.

### Ge Pangxiao

**MILK NAME:** Ge Pangxiao (葛胖小 / Surname Ge, “Chubby youngster”)

Chang Geng’s childhood tag-along who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng after becoming orphaned. Ge Pangxiao has a fondness for machines.

### Cao Niangzi

**MILK NAME:** Cao Niangzi (曹娘子 / Surname Cao, “Lady”)

Chang Geng’s childhood admirer, who leaves Yanhui Town with Chang Geng. Cao Niangzi enjoys dressing up as both women and men, and is an expert at taking on different roles.

### Xiu-niang

**ALIAS:** Xiu-niang (秀娘 / “Refined lady”)

**GIVEN NAME:** Huge’er (胡格尔 / “The violet gold at the heart of the earth”)

Chang Geng’s “mother,” who turns out to be his aunt. She is a member of the Celestial Wolf Tribe and their agent inside Great Liang.

**Company Commander Xu**

**RANK:** Company Commander

Xiu-niang's husband in Yanhui Town and Chang Geng's stepfather.

**Jialai Yinghuo**

**GIVEN NAME:** Jialai (加莱)

**NAME TRANSLATED INTO CHINESE:** Yinghuo (荧惑 / "Glimmering deceiver" or "Mars")

**TITLE:** Crown Prince of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

The crown prince of the Celestial Wolf Tribe. He orchestrates the infiltration and attack on Great Liang at the beginning of the story.

**The Yuanhe Emperor**

**ERA NAME:** Yuanhe (元和 / "Primal," "Harmony")

The reigning emperor of Great Liang at the start of the story. Chang Geng's birth father.

**The Noble Consort**

**TITLE:** Noble Consort

**TITLE:** Goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe

Chang Geng's birth mother. As the goddess of the Celestial Wolf Tribe, she was gifted to Great Liang after their surrender, and became the sole noble consort within the imperial harem.

**Li Feng**

**GIVEN NAME:** Li Feng (李丰 / Surname Li, "Plentiful")

**ERA NAME:** Longan (隆安 / "Grand Peace")

Chang Geng’s elder half-brother, the crown prince, who ascends the throne after the death of his father, the Yuanhe Emperor.

**Prince Wei**

**TITLE:** Prince Wei (魏 / “Kingdom of Wei”)

Chang Geng’s elder half-brother, the Second Prince. Son of the Yuanhe Emperor.

**Emperor Wu**

The reigning Emperor of Great Liang prior to the Yuanhe Emperor at the start of the story. Gu Yun’s maternal grandfather.

**Liao Ran**

**DHARMA NAME:** Liao Ran (了然 / “To understand,” “To be so”)

**TITLE:** Great Master

A multi-talented monk from the National Temple who brings Chang Geng and his friends on a journey.

**Liao Chi**

**DHARMA NAME:** Liao Chi (了痴, “To understand,” “Infatuation”)

**TITLE:** Abbot of the Temple of National Protection

Abbot of the National Temple and Liao Ran’s shixiong.

**Yao Zhen**

**GIVEN NAME:** Yao Zhen (姚镇 / Surname Yao, “Town”)

**COURTESY NAME:** Yao Chongze (姚重泽 / Surname Yao, “Great favor”)

**TITLE:** Regional Judiciary Commissioner of Yingtian

Gu Yun’s longtime acquaintance and a local official in Jiangnan.

## INSTITUTIONS

### The Government of Great Liang

The emperor is the highest authority in Great Liang, an autocratic monarchy. The top-level administrative bodies of the state include a number of departments and ministries, such as the Ministry of Revenue and Ministry of War.

Years ago, the militant Emperor Wu expanded the borders of Great Liang and built the nation to the height of its power. Due to his lack of male heirs, the more compassionate Yuanhe Emperor was selected as his successor from a different branch of the imperial royal family. The Longan Emperor, the son of Yuanhe Emperor, takes after his father in temperament.

### The Military of Great Liang and the Black Iron Battalion

The armed forces of Great Liang consist of eight major military branches—the Kite, Carapace, Steed, Pelt, Hawk, Chariot, Cannon, and Dragon Divisions—each of which specializes in a particular type of warfare. Troops are divided among five major garrisons located in five different regions throughout the country.

Chief among these is the Black Iron Battalion, which is presently stationed in the Western Regions. An elite group of soldiers widely considered to be one of the most powerful military forces in the known world, the Black Iron Battalion is currently under the command of Marshal Gu Yun and comprises the Black Hawk, Black Carapace, and Black Steed Divisions.

### The Temple of National Protection

The Temple of National Protection, also known as the National Temple, practices Buddhism, the religion of Great Liang’s imperial family.

**The Lingshu Institute (灵枢 / “Spiritual pivot”)**

An academy directly under the emperor’s authority that develops the equipment of Great Liang’s military, as well as other mechanical inventions.

**The Linyuan Pavilion (临渊 / “Approaching the abyss”)**

A mysterious organization of people from all levels of society that emerges to aid parties they find worthy in times of chaos.

# LOCATIONS

## GREAT LIANG

### Yanhui Town (雁回 / “Wild goose’s return”)

A town on the northern border of Great Liang, where Chang Geng grew up.

### The Capital

The capital city of Great Liang.

### Yingtian Prefecture

A prefecture in Jiangnan Province near the East Sea.

## FOREIGN POWERS

### The Eighteen Tianlang (Celestial Wolf) Tribes

A people residing in the grasslands north of Great Liang, where violet gold is plentiful. They pay an annual tribute to Great Liang after being defeated in battle by the Black Iron Battalion.

### Loulan

A small but prosperous nation in the Western Regions located at the entrance of the Silk Road. They have a friendly relationship with Great Liang.

### Dongying

An island nation to the east of Great Liang.

**The Far West**

A region far to the west beyond the Silk Road that excels in seafaring trade and creating violet-gold-powered devices.

# NAME GUIDE

## NAMES, HONORIFICS, AND TITLES

### Courtesy Names versus Given Names

A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. Traditionally, this was at the age of twenty during one's crowning ceremony, but it can also be presented when an elder or teacher deems the recipient worthy. Though generally a male-only tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting a courtesy name after marriage. Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class.

It was considered disrespectful for one's peers of the same generation to address someone by their given name, especially in formal or written communication. Use of one's given name was reserved only for elders, close friends, and spouses.

This practice is no longer used in modern China, but is commonly seen in historically-inspired media. As such, many characters have more than one name. Its implementation in novels is irregular and is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling.

### Milk Names

In China, babies are traditionally given their 大名 (literally "big name," or less literally, "given name") one hundred days after their birth. During those first hundred days, parents would refer to the child by their 小名 (lit. "little name") or 乳名 (lit. "milk name"). Milk names might be childish, employing a diminutive like xiao- or doubling a syllable, but they might also be selected to ward off harm to the child, for example Cao Niangzi's milk name meaning "lady." Many parents might continue referring to their children by their milk name long after they have received their given name.

At the beginning of *Stars of Chaos*, Chang Geng is already thirteen or fourteen years old, but has not been given a "big name." Since Yanhui Town is a backwater border town, this is not terribly strange—historically,

many rural families have tended to give their children given names much later in life than the hundredth day. This may be because life in the countryside was harsher and it was more difficult to raise children to adulthood.

### Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

**A-:** Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a disyllabic name.

**XIAO-:** A diminutive meaning “little.” Always a prefix.

### Family

**DAGE:** A word meaning “eldest brother.” It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer that one respects. When added as a suffix, it becomes an affectionate address for any older male. Can also be used by itself to refer to one’s true oldest brother.

**JIEJIE:** A word meaning “elder sister.” It can be attached as a suffix or used independently to address an unrelated female peer.

**NIANG:** A word meaning “mother” or “lady.”

**XIONG:** A word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

**YIFU:** A word meaning “godfather” or “adoptive father.” (*See Godparentage Relationships for more information)*

### Martial Arts and Tutelage

**SHIDI:** Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own school.

**SHIFU:** Teacher or master. For one’s master in one’s own school. Gender-neutral.

**SHISHU:** The younger martial sibling of one’s master. Gender-neutral.

**SHIXIONG:** Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own school.

**XIANSHENG:** A respectful suffix with several uses, including for someone with a great deal of expertise in their profession or a teacher. Can be used independently.

# PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Stars of Chaos.*

*More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com*

**Shā pò láng**

Shā as in **sho**p

Pò as in **pu**t

Láng as in **long**

**Cháng Gēng**

Ch as in **ch**ange, áng as in l**ong**

G as in **g**oose, ēng as in s**ung**

**Gù Yún**

Gù as in **goo**se

Y as in you, ún as in b**in**, but with lips rounded as for b**oon**

## GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

**Q:** a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

**C:** **ts** as in pan**ts**

**Z:** **z** as in **z**oom

**S:** **s** as in **s**ilk

**CH:** **ch** as in **ch**arm

**ZH:** **dg** as in do**dg**e

**SH:** **sh** as in **sh**ave

**G:** hard **g** as in **g**allant

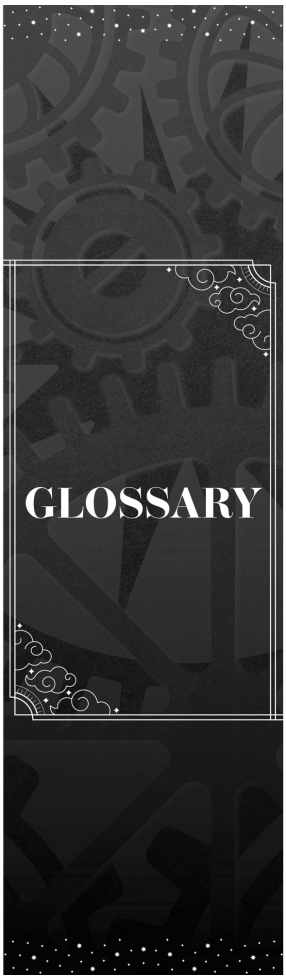
**GENERAL VOWELS**

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

**IU:** **y** as in **y**ou plus **ow** as in sh**ow**

**IE:** **ye** as in **ye**s

**UO:** **wa** as in **wa**rm


GLOSSARY

# GLOSSARY

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context to the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel and provide a starting point for learning more about the rich Chinese culture from which these stories were written.

## TERMINOLOGY

**ACUPOINTS:** Specific points on the body where needles or pressure may be applied to relieve pain and other symptoms.

**BALD DONKEY:** A derogatory epithet used to describe Buddhist monks. It stems from the stereotypical image of a bald monk riding a donkey while begging for alms.

**BOWING AND CURTSYING:** As is seen in other Asian cultures, standing bows are a traditional greeting and are also used when giving an apology. A deeper bow shows greater respect.

**BUDDHISM:** The central belief of Buddhism is that life is a cycle of suffering and rebirth, only to be escaped by reaching enlightenment (nirvana). Buddhists believe in karma, that a person's actions will influence their fortune in this life and future lives. The teachings of the Buddha are known as The Middle Way and emphasize a practice that is neither extreme asceticism nor extreme indulgence.

**CONCUBINES AND THE IMPERIAL HAREM:** In ancient China, it was common practice for a wealthy man to possess women as concubines in addition to his wife. They were expected to live with him and bear him children. Generally speaking, a greater number of concubines correlated to

higher social status, hence a wealthy merchant might have two or three concubines, while an emperor might have tens or even a hundred.

The imperial harem had its own ranking system. The exact details vary over the course of history, but can generally be divided into three overarching ranks: the empress, consorts, and concubines. The status of a prince or princess's mother is an important factor in their status in the imperial family, in addition to birth order and their own personal merits. Given the patrilineal rules of succession, the birth of a son can also elevate the mother's status, leading to fierce, oftentimes deadly, competition amongst ambitious members of the imperial harem.

**CONFUCIANISM:** Confucianism is a philosophy based on the teachings of Confucius. Its influence on all aspects of Chinese culture is incalculable. Confucius placed heavy importance on respect for one's elders and family, a concept broadly known as filial piety (孝). The family structure is used in other contexts to urge similar behaviors, such as respect of a student toward a teacher, or people of a country toward their ruler.

**COUGHING OR SPITTING BLOOD:** A way to show a character is ill, injured, or upset. Despite the very physical nature of the response, it does not necessarily mean that a character has been wounded; their body could simply be reacting to a very strong emotion.

**CROWS:** An inauspicious symbol in Chinese culture. A person "has the beak of a crow" if they are prone to saying inauspicious things.

**CULTIVATION:** A practice in Daoism-inspired Chinese myth through which humans can achieve immortality and non-human creatures can acquire higher forms, more humanoid forms, or both.

**DHARMA NAME:** A name given to new disciples of Buddhism during their initiation ritual.

**DAOISM:** Daoism is the philosophy of the dao (道 / "the way"). Following the dao involves coming into harmony with the natural order of the universe, which makes someone a "true human," safe from external harm and able to affect the world without intentional action. Cultivation is a concept based on Daoist beliefs.

**DRAGONS:** There are several kinds of dragons in Chinese mythology. Jiao (蛟) or jiaolong (蛟龙), "flood dragons," are hornless, aquatic dragons that can summon storms and floods. Zhenlong (真龙), "true dragons," also have water-related powers, but are capable of flying through the clouds. "True" dragons are a symbol of the divine and the emperor, hence the translation as "imperial dragons" in this story. According to myth, flood dragons can transform into true, or imperial, dragons by cultivating and passing heavenly tribulations.

**ERA NAME:** A designation for the years when a given emperor was on the throne (or some part of those years). This title is determined by the emperor when they ascend the throne, and can be used to refer to both the era and the emperor himself.

**FACE:** Mianzi (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation, and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

**FIRESTARTER:** An ancient "lighter" made of easily flammable material inside a bamboo tube. It can be ignited by shaking or blowing on it.

**FOOT BINDING:** A process used to create artificially small feet, which were seen as an attractive trait for women during certain periods of Chinese history. The process involved breaking and tightly binding the foot to mold its shape. The foot might also be bound with pieces of broken crockery in order to induce necrosis in the broken toes and cause them to fall off, leading to a smaller final result.

**GODPARENTAGE RELATIONSHIPS:** Similar to the idea of "sworn brothers," gan (干) relationships are nominal familial relationships entered into by non-blood-related parties for a variety of reasons.

In the setting of *Stars of Chaos*, the border towns have a tradition where a debt of gratitude that a person could not repay by other means would be recognized by either the recipient or their descendants naming their benefactor as their godparent. Entering this relationship means that the recipient (or their descendant) now acknowledges filial duties toward their new godparent, such as making sure they are taken care of in their old age.

**INCENSE TIME:** A common way to tell time in ancient China, referring to how long it takes for a single incense stick to burn. Standardized incense sticks were manufactured and calibrated for specific time measurements: a half hour, an hour, a day, etc. These were available to people of all social classes. "One incense time" is roughly thirty minutes.

**IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM:** The official system of examinations in ancient China that qualified someone for official service. It was a supposedly meritocratic system that allowed students from all backgrounds to rise up in society, but the extent to which this was true varied across time.

**JIANGHU:** The jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes. It is a staple of wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes"), one of the oldest

Chinese literary genres, which consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice.

**LOTUS FLOWER:** This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha. An extremely rare variety known as the bingdi lian (并蒂莲) or “twin lotus” is considered an auspicious sign and a symbol of marital harmony.

**MANDARIN DUCKS:** Famous for mating for life, mandarin ducks are a symbol of marital harmony, and are frequently featured in Chinese art.

**SHA PO LANG:** Sha Po Lang (杀破狼) is the name of a key star formation in Zi Wei Dou Shu (紫微斗数 / “purple star astrology”), a common system of astrology in Chinese culture. It refers to an element of a natal star chart in which the stars Qi Sha (七杀 / “seven killings”), Tan Lang (贪狼 / “greedy wolf”), and Po Jun (破军 / “vanquisher of armies”) appear in four specific “palaces” of the sky.

Sha Po Lang in a natal horoscope foretells change and revolution, a turbulent fate. The fortunate among those with this in their star chart gain talent and fortune amidst chaos, while the less fortunate encounter disaster and destitution. Those with this formation in their natal horoscope will encounter great ups and downs, yet have the potential to make their name in dramatic fashion. Many great generals of ancient times were said to have been born under these stars.

**THREE IMMORTAL SOULS AND SEVEN MORTAL FORMS:** Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal souls or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po is common in Daoism.

**TIGER TALLY:** A token used as proof of imperial authorization to deploy and command troops. In *Stars of Chaos*, there are three Black Iron Tiger Tallies total, which can command the eight branches of the Great Liang military in times of emergency. They are held by Gu Yun, the imperial court, and the emperor, respectively.

**TITLES OF NOBILITY:** Titles of nobility are an important feature of the traditional social structure of Imperial China. While the conferral and organization of specific titles evolved over time, in *Stars of Chaos*, such titles can be either inherited or bestowed by the emperor.

In the world of *Stars of Chaos*, a notable feature of the ranking system with respect to the imperial princes is that monosyllabic titles are reserved for princes of the first rank while disyllabic titles designate princes of the second rank.

Princes of the second rank are also known as commandery princes, so named for the administrative divisions they head. The title of commandery prince is not solely reserved for members of the imperial family, but can also be given to meritorious officials and rulers of vassal states.

**UNBOUND HAIR:** In ancient China, neatly bound hair was historically an important aspect of one's attire. Loose, unbound hair was seen as highly improper, and is used as synecdoche to describe someone who is disheveled in appearance.

**WILD GEESE:** A classic motif in Chinese poetry, the wild goose, or yan (雁), has come to embody a host of different symbolic meanings. As a migratory bird, it can represent seasonal change as well as a loving message sent from afar. Famous for mating for life, a pair of geese can allude to marital bliss, while a lone goose can signify the loss of a loved one.

**WUXING THEORY:** Wuxing (五行 / "Five Phases") is a concept in Chinese philosophy used for describing interactions and relationships between phenomena. The expression 五行 (literally "five motions")

originally refers to the movements of the planets Mars (火星 / “fire star”), Mercury (水星 / “water star”), Jupiter (木星 / “wood star”), Venus (金星 / “metal star”), and Saturn (土星 / “earth star”), which correspond to the phases of fire, water, wood, metal, and earth, respectively. In wuxing cosmology, people are categorized according to the five phases and relationships are described in cycles.

Xiangke (相克 / lit. “mutually overcoming”) refers to a cycle in which one phase acts as a restricting (and oftentimes destructive) agent on the other. The phase interactions in the ke (克) cycle are: wood breaks through earth, earth dams up water, water douses fire, fire melts metal, and metal chops through wood. When applied to people, these interactions take the form of karmic consequences, which are oftentimes directed at the children and other family members of the original actor. An example of one such cycle might be: An emperor killed many people to expand the nation → the adverse effects of his great deeds are directed toward his children in the form of early death.

Chinese superstition also holds that, due to their phase categorization, certain people’s fate can “suppress” (克) the fates of the people around them. For example, if someone is categorized as metal, they may suppress people who have been categorized as wood. Similarly, if someone’s fate is determined to be more tenacious than others, they may bring harm to their familial relations. In the case of Gu Yun’s unmarriageable status, people have observed the misfortune that befell his family and concluded that he inherited a similar fate. Thus, any woman who marries him will suffer misfortune as her fate is suppressed by his.

**YIN AND YANG ENERGY:** The concept of yin and yang in Chinese philosophy that describes the complementary interdependence of opposite or contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy can do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever they lack.

# THE WORLD OF STARS OF CHAOS

**COPPER SQUALL:** A horn-shaped device made of copper that amplifies the voice of the speaker when spoken into.

**GIANT KITE AND RED-HEADED KITE:** A large, amphibious airship, the giant kite is powered by steam and equipped with thousands of wing-like structures called fire pinions, which burn violet gold.

A variation of the giant kite is the red-headed kite. Unlike the giant kite, the red-headed kite is a small pleasure vessel that does not see use in the military.

**HEAVY ARMOR:** A class of armor used in the military, heavy armor is powered by violet gold, allowing its wearers to traverse thousands of kilometers in seconds and lift objects weighing hundreds of kilograms. A single suit of heavy armor has the power to annihilate a thousand soldiers.

**IRON CUFF:** The part of light armor that encircles the wrist. Highly convenient, iron cuffs can be removed from full suits of armor and used on their own. A single iron cuff can conceal three or four silk darts.

**LIGHT ARMOR:** A class of armor used in the military, light armor is typically worn by the cavalry and can only support a small amount of propulsion. It relies primarily on man and animal power, and its primary advantages lie in how light and convenient it is.

**LIGHT PELT:** The lightest class of armor used in the military, the light pelt is specially designed for riding and weighs less than fifteen kilograms.

**PARHELION BOW AND ARROW:** A giant mechanical bow that runs on violet gold. When fully powered up, arrows released from such a bow can

pierce through a city wall a dozen meters thick.

**SILK DART:** An extraordinarily thin knife that can be concealed in and fired from wrist cuffs.

**VIOLET GOLD:** A substance mined from beneath the earth which can be burned as fuel in high-quality mechanical devices. It is of such strategic importance that it is called the “lifeline” of Great Liang.

**WINDSLASHER:** A weapon used by the Black Iron Battalion. It looks like a staff when at rest, but spinning blades release from hidden incisions in one end when the weapon is spun.

**WU’ERGU:** A slow-acting poison of northern barbarian origin. It is purported to have the ability to transform someone into a great warrior, but those afflicted with wu’ergu are plagued with nightmares and eventually driven insane with bloodlust.

## About the Author

An internationally renowned author who writes for the novel serialization website, JJWXC, priest's books have inspired multimedia adaptations and been published in numerous languages around the world. priest is known for writing compelling drama that incorporates humor and creativity, and a grand sense of style that infuses her worldbuilding. Her works include *Stars of Chaos: Sha Po Lang*, *Guardian: Zhen Hun*, *Liu Yao: The Revitalization of Fuyao Sect*, *Mo Du (Silent Reading)*, and *Can Ci Pin (The Defective)*, among others.

## Footnotes

1. 大 哥, dage is a word meaning “eldest brother.” When added as a suffix, it becomes an affectionate address for any older male.

2. 五蝠, wu fu, is a homonym for “five blessings” (五福). The number five is associated with wuxing (the five phases) and is considered auspicious.

3. 先生, xiansheng is a suffix meaning “teacher” for people in certain professions.

4. 娘, niang, is a word meaning “mother” or “lady.”

5. A globular vessel flute somewhat similar to an ocarina.

6. A traditional Chinese method of potty training uses whistles to train children to pee on command in a conditioned response.

7. The Ghost Festival is a traditional Daoist and Buddhist festival in which ghosts and spirits of deceased relatives come out from the underworld and return to the mortal realm.

8. In Chinese, the west is often evoked as a euphemism for death. For instance, guixi (归西) means, “To return to the Western Paradise.”

9. The fifth night watch period (of a total of five) is from 3:00 to 5:00 a.m.

10. 铁树, tieshu, or “iron tree,” is Chinese for sago palm, so named due to the unusually high density of its wood. The sago palm blooms very rarely, hence the expression “an iron tree blooms once every thousand years,” used to describe incredibly rare events.

11. A style of historical Chinese clothing typically worn by women, which consists of a jacket and a wrap-around skirt.

12. 启明, Qiming, and 长庚, Changgeng, are the Chinese names for the planet Venus in the east before dawn (also known as the morning star) and in the west after dusk (also known as the evening star), respectively.

13. 兄, xiong, is a word meaning “elder brother.” It can be attached as a suffix to address an unrelated male peer.

14. A magical pair of wheels on which one can stand to ride at great speed, famously used by the protection deity Nezha.

15. An elite scholarly institution responsible for performing secretarial and literary tasks for the imperial court, as well as advising the emperor. Admission into the Academy was considered a prestigious honor and was granted only to outstanding candidates of the imperial examination.

16. Also known as the Spiritual Pivot, the Lingshu is an ancient Chinese medical text written during the Western Zhou dynasty.

17. Mythological fox spirits capable of shapeshifting, huli jing can assume human form through cultivation and are oftentimes depicted as clever tricksters.

18. A famous line from *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

19. The ten heavenly stems and the twelve earthly branches, also known as the sexagenary cycle, are two counting systems historically used in traditional calendrical systems in China.

20. A line from *Dream of the Red Chamber* by Cao Xueqin, one of the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

21. A line from *The Analects of Confucius.*

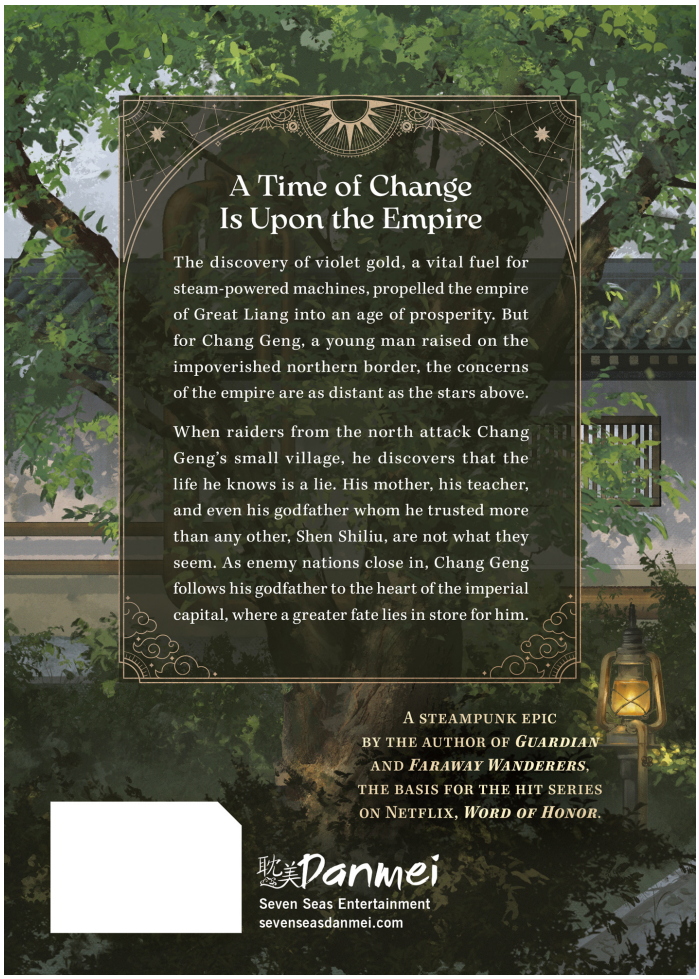
22. Lines from the poem “To the Departing Maidservant” by the Tang dynasty poet Cui Jiao.

23. 公公, gonggong, is a title or suffix used for eunuchs.

24. 孔方兄, kongfang-xiong (lit. “square-holed brother”), is slang for money, so named because in pre-modern times, Chinese coins had a square hole in the middle.

25. A legendary island of immortals in Chinese mythology located in the East Sea.

26. Literally “dwarf pirates,” a name for groups of marauders who raided Chinese and Korean coasts between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.


A Time of Change
Is Upon the Empire
The discovery of violet gold, a vital fuel for steam-powered machines, propelled the empire of Great Liang into an age of prosperity. But for Chang Geng, a young man raised on the impoverished northern border, the concerns of the empire are as distant as the stars above.
When raiders from the north attack Chang Geng's small village, he discovers that the life he knows is a lie. His mother, his teacher, and even his godfather whom he trusted more than any other, Shen Shiliu, are not what they seem. As enemy nations close in, Chang Geng follows his godfather to the heart of the imperial capital, where a greater fate lies in store for him.
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